



# *Brighton Rescue*

A Pride and Prejudice Variation  
Laraba Kendig

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By Laraba Kendig

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Sneak Peek of *Longbourn Inheritance*

Regency Romance Books by Laraba Kendig

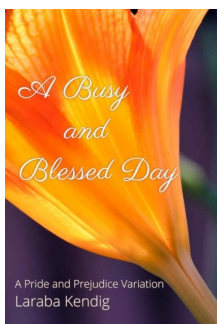
Note from the Author

Dedication

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# Chapter 1

*July 20th, 1812*

*Longbourn*

*Meryton, Hertfordshire*

“I believe that I am ready,” Elizabeth Bennet declared, glancing around at her bedroom. Her trunk was neatly packed and her room tidy, which pleased her. She did not care to leave her belongings in disarray when she went on holiday.

“I will miss you, Lizzy,” Jane Bennet, the eldest of the five Bennet daughters, said from the window seat near Elizabeth’s window.

“I will miss you too, my dear sister,” Elizabeth replied, “but we will only be gone three weeks.”

Jane sighed and answered, “I am sorry that our uncle Gardiner’s business concerns shortened your trip. I know you greatly desired to see the Lakes.”

“Perhaps I can visit the Lakes another year,” Elizabeth said stoutly. “Derbyshire is a truly lovely county by all accounts, and I have

no doubt we will have a charming time. I only hope you do not find yourself completely exhausted helping care for our young Gardiner cousins for these weeks.”

Jane’s glorious countenance brightened with joy. “I will enjoy every minute of it, Lizzy. Children are such a blessing, and our cousins are delightful.”

The door to the bedroom suddenly swung open to reveal the flustered form of one of the maids, Sally Childers. The girl was a niece of Mr. and Mrs. Hill, the butler and housekeeper of Longbourn, and was still young and learning her tasks well. Jane and Elizabeth looked up in mild alarm, fearful that Sally had broken another tea cup. The last time she had done so, their mother, Mrs. Bennet, always prone to histrionics, had nearly fainted in anguish.

“What is it, Sally?” Elizabeth asked kindly, gesturing for the young woman to enter the room.

Sally was, her young mistresses noted in some astonishment, clutching papers in her hand. That was odd; few servants were literate, and even fewer had the time to write letters.

“Oh, Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth,” the girl moaned piteously, “oh, I do not know what to do!”

“Come here,” Jane ordered, though gently. “What is the matter?”

“Tis this letter, Miss. I was ... I was cleaning Miss Kitty’s room and it was on the desk and I ... I did not mean to read it but...”

“You read Miss Kitty’s letter?” Elizabeth demanded, her tone arctic. To read a private message was beyond the pale. For a servant to do so was almost beyond her capacity to imagine. Sally would lose her position for this travesty, and Mr. and Mrs. Hill would be shamed...

“Miss Lydia is planning to elope with a man named Wickham,” the girl squealed, causing both women’s thoughts to grind to a sudden, shocked halt.

Jane and Elizabeth exchanged horrified glances and Jane gasped, “Impossible!”

“But Miss, the letter says...”

Jane shushed the maid impatiently and, with only a sliver of reluctance, turned her attention on the letter. Elizabeth hurried up beside her to read over her sister’s shoulder.



*Dearest Kitty,*

*Our plans continue apace. My dear Wickham and I are more in love every day, and I am quite confident we will be leaving for Gretna Greene soon to be married. Can you believe it, Kitty? I, the youngest of us all, will be the first one married! I promise you that I will wheedle Mama into having you join us; the militia is a wonderful way to find a husband!*

*Oh, I must tell you about my new bonnet. Harriet was full of admiration at my trimmings...*

Elizabeth, to Sally's astonishment, threw her arms around the young woman.

"Sally, you may have saved us all! Do not speak of this to anyone, please! Not even to Mr. and Mrs. Hill!"

"I will not, Miss. I promise."

"Go back to your tasks and if Miss Kitty asks about her letter, tell her to talk to me."

"Yes, Miss."

As soon as the young servant had departed the room and shut the door, Elizabeth, her face pale with worry, turned to her elder sister. "We must go to our Father

immediately.”

Jane was reading the letter again, a frown wrinkling her lovely brow. “Lizzy, this is certainly of concern but is not our youngest sister merely being foolish? According to Mr. Darcy of Pemberley, Wickham is a fortune hunter. Our poor sister is not an heiress. Surely Lydia is merely engaging in an imaginary love affair.”

Elizabeth stared at her beloved sister and swallowed a cry of exasperation. She adored Jane, she did, but for all her two and twenty years, the eldest Miss Bennet was still ridiculously naïve.

“No, Jane,” she said steadily, “I have no doubt that Wickham has no intention of marrying Lydia, but I also think he is quite willing to engage in other forms of intimacy.”

Jane paled and actually swayed, and Elizabeth pushed her firmly onto the window seat. “I am sorry, but you must face reality now. Wickham is an evil man and I am confident he would not hesitate to take advantage of Lydia’s innocence and, yes, idiocy.”

“But, but,” Jane stammered, “even if he were willing to do such a vile thing, surely

Lydia has too much honor and delicacy...”

Her younger sister snorted and began pacing across the wooden floor of her bedroom. “Honor, Jane? Delicacy? You know that our youngest sister has been indulged since she was a baby. Our mother has permitted, no, *encouraged* her, to be the worst of flirts. You know that Mrs. Forster is only two years older than Lydia, and I never considered her a remotely suitable guardian for our sister. No, Jane, Lydia would doubtless give up her virtue if Wickham assured her that they would marry. Then he would abandon her because as you said, he is a fortune hunter.”

“But Lydia is a gentleman’s daughter, and is under the protection of the colonel of the militia regiment in which Wickham serves! Elizabeth, even if he is so wicked a man, which I *cannot* believe, he would not dare!”

Elizabeth considered this thoughtfully. There was some truth to that point; Wickham could hardly ruin Lydia without immediate repercussions unless the girl could be convinced to keep quiet. Which she would, Elizabeth realized grimly. Lydia was foolish enough to think a clandestine affair quite

romantic. But Jane would not be able to understand her fears, looking as she did through rosy glasses at an often dark world.

The sad reality was that the entire Bennet family hovered on the edge of a precipice, inches away from total ruin. If Wickham deflowered Lydia Bennet, her sisters would, one and all, be tainted by the shame. Dear Jane, so beautiful, so kind, so perfect, would never find true love, and would quite possibly never marry at all. Elizabeth herself, who had spurned two eligible offers in the past months, would find herself a lonely old maid. In truth, the idea of remaining unmarried had never troubled her greatly in the past, but now, faced with the reality of being prevented from ever marrying, of being shunned and despised by society, a knot twisted in her stomach. She recognized that she wished very much to marry a man whom she admired and respected, to bear his children, to be happy together. This stark realization took her breath away; all that she longed for in life might be snatched away.

Nor would the ruination of the Bennets mean merely a life of loneliness for Elizabeth and her sisters. Their mother, Mrs. Bennet, had brought only five thousand pounds into

her marriage, and Longbourn was entailed away to the foolish clergyman, Mr. Collins; if none of the Bennet daughters married, they would be genuinely poor. It would not be a question of not being able to afford new gowns; they might have trouble purchasing food itself. Given that horrifying reality, Mrs. Bennet's constant harping about being 'thrown into the hedgerows', while vexatious, could actually come to pass.

Tears filled Elizabeth's eyes; she was generally a cheerful, optimistic woman, but now she could only see doom stretching before her and her family. She wondered, in this moment, if she had been a fool to turn down her opportunities to wed. Not Mr. Collins – no, she could never regret that, for the man was an utter buffoon – but Mr. Darcy of Pemberley? He was stiff and arrogant, but he was also honorable, wealthy, intelligent, well read, and he had loved her.

It was too late to repine; she had made her choice, and indeed she could not truly regret it. It would not be fair to Mr. Darcy, who had genuinely adored her, to accept his offer for merely pragmatic reasons. Nor could she imagine the horror of being married to Mr. Darcy, only to have his name dragged through

the mud through his association with the Bennets through Lydia's folly.

"Lizzy?"

Elizabeth looked up to observe Jane staring at her with concern. She considered sharing her gloomy thoughts, but there was no point in doing so. Jane would not, *could* not, understand her fears.

"Whether he would take Lydia's virtue or not, our sister is a simpleton to even talk of elopement," Elizabeth said. "We must go to Father with this!"

She turned resolutely toward the door and Jane, with a soft sigh of concern, followed her toward the stairway leading to the library. Elizabeth could not muster up much hope that Mr. Bennet would intervene; he had already proven himself all too careless in his oversight of Lydia by permitting her to visit Brighton, where numerous militia regiments were currently stationed. However, only Mr. Bennet had the authority to interfere in this dreadful situation. She found herself fervently praying that for once in his life, her father would act to protect them all.

“My dear Elizabeth,” Mr. Bennet said patiently, pinching the bridge of his nose with his left thumb and forefinger, “you are reading far too much into this letter. Lydia is, without a doubt, the most ignorant girl walking the earth, but Mr. Wickham is a man close to thirty years of age, and hardly interested in marrying a penniless child.”

Elizabeth inhaled a deep breath and blew it out slowly, struggling to contain her temper. “You are entirely correct, Father, that Wickham will not marry Lydia. However, he may ruin her if she allows him to take her virtue.”

Mr. Bennet leaned back in his chair, his forehead creased in confusion. “What is this, my dear Lizzy? I thought the lieutenant was a prime favorite of yours.”

“He was,” Elizabeth admitted in some embarrassment, “but now I entirely loathe the man.”

“Why?”

“When I was in Hunsford visiting Charlotte Collins, Mr. Darcy was there visiting his aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.”

“You did not mention that before.”

“No, because it was quite humiliating. The truth is that I accused Mr. Darcy of blasting Mr. Wickham’s hopes in the matter of the church living which was meant to go to the lieutenant.”

Mr. Bennet’s eyebrows hiked high in his forehead. “Did you indeed? That was rather forward of you, was it not?”

“I was angry with him,” Elizabeth confessed. “Mr. Darcy has that effect on me. At any rate, he explained that Mr. Wickham requested, and was given, three thousand pounds in exchange for giving up all rights to the church living, and he ran through the money in short order. He then returned to Pemberley and demanded the living when the previous occupant died. Naturally, Mr. Darcy refused, especially since Wickham is a gambler and does not treat women ... well. He in no way should be a clergyman.”

Her father leaned forward and said sympathetically, “My dear daughter, that must have been an unwelcome shock.”

“It was quite a horrible shock,” his second daughter acknowledged, her eyes filled with tears. “I was so proud of my own discernment, of my ability to understand the



characters of those I meet, and yet I embraced without question the lies of Mr. Wickham about his godfather's son, and allowed myself to form a violent distaste for Mr. Darcy, when I now believe him to be a very honorable gentleman."

"He did insult you the day you met," Jane murmured softly, gazing at her sister in concern.

Elizabeth shrugged a little. "Yes, he declared that I was 'not handsome enough to dance with' in my hearing. Well, that was exceedingly rude, but it is nothing compared to slandering the son of one's godfather, and gambling thousands of pounds away, and mistreating women. Father, do you not see that Wickham is a bad man, and that Lydia is in great danger?"

Mr. Bennet looked upon his favorite daughter with compassion. "Elizabeth, I understand now. You are naturally distressed that you were in error concerning the dispositions of these two young men, and it has caused you to give way to quite unnatural fears. You thought Wickham the very best of men, and now you are inclined to think him the very worst. I daresay he is like most men, somewhere in the middle. Now Lizzy, I will

write a letter to Colonel Forster and inform him that your foolish youngest sister is inclined to think herself in love with Wickham; he will take any necessary steps.”

“But Father...”

“No, no,” the master of Longbourn interrupted. “I absolutely refuse to let you torment yourself in this way, my dear, bright Elizabeth. Go on your journey with your aunt and uncle to Derbyshire, and put the whole matter out of your mind. Lydia is safe enough.”

Elizabeth began crying in anguish. Lydia was in danger and her father, as usual, would not lift a finger to prevent her from ruining not only herself, but her sisters as well.

“I do believe that the Gardiners have arrived,” Mr. Bennet said, eyeing his usually cheerful daughter with unease. “Jane, please take Elizabeth upstairs to her room so she can finish her packing.”

Jane obediently rose to her feet and grasped her favorite sister gently by the arm. “Come along, Lizzy. Father is right. Lydia will be well.”

Elizabeth, still sobbing, rose slowly from

her chair and allowed Jane to guide her out the door and up the stairs. What she had feared had come to pass; her father was too lazy, too indolent, too idle, to take the necessary action to save Lydia from herself. Unless by some miracle Wickham turned his eyes elsewhere, all hope was lost for Elizabeth Bennet and her sisters.

## Chapter 2

“Elizabeth, what is wrong?” Mrs. Madeline Gardiner asked of her niece. The Gardiner children were being put to bed by Jane and their nursemaids, and Mrs. Gardiner had followed Elizabeth to her bedroom.

Elizabeth had managed to dry her tears and present a mostly calm face at dinner that night, but her aunt, who knew her well, had realized that something was distressing her.

“Oh Aunt,” Elizabeth began, and then shook her head. “I do not know that I should share my concerns. There is nothing to be done, after all.”

Mrs. Gardiner sat down on the window seat and patted the place beside her invitingly. “I do not know whether I can do anything or not, but trouble shared is trouble halved, as they say. Do tell me what is upsetting you.”

Elizabeth sat down slowly, hesitatingly, and then drew Lydia’s letter out of her sleeve. “Read this, Aunt.”

Madeline Gardiner did so and then looked up in confusion. “My dear, this is certainly most indelicate, but you are not

taking it seriously, I hope? Surely Mr. Wickham would not actually run off to Gretna Greene with Lydia!”

Elizabeth tightened her fists in anguish. “No, Aunt, I do not believe that Mr. Wickham will elope with Lydia to Scotland. I *do* believe he will ruin her if she offers him the chance.”

Her aunt gazed at her in troubled wonder. “Elizabeth! I thought you were very fond of Mr. Wickham.”

“I once was, most certainly, but only because I am a fool. Oh Aunt, when I was in Kent, visiting my friend, Charlotte Collins, I met Mr. Darcy and ... and I reproached him for what he had done to Wickham regarding the church living which the elder Mr. Darcy meant for his godson. Mr. Darcy told me the truth, that Wickham was given three thousand pounds to give up rights to the Kympton living, that he is a profligate spender, a gambler, and a libertine. He is a horrible man, Aunt, and Lydia...”

Her voice trailed away, suspended by tears, and Madeline Gardiner leaned forward to wrap her arms around her niece. “My dear Lizzy, that is distressing indeed! When we met him last December here at Longbourn, Mr.

Wickham seemed a most excellent young man.”

“He has the face and demeanor of an angel and the soul of a snake,” Lizzy said with a gulp.

Mrs. Gardiner wrapped her arms around the girl and allowed her to cry for a few minutes, and then solemnly provided a handkerchief when Elizabeth seemed ready to converse again.

“I assume you told your father of the letter?” the older woman asked compassionately.

Elizabeth nodded, her lips compressed, and explained, “He discounted my concerns entirely. He said he will write to Colonel Forster and mention that Lydia is enamored with Wickham, but it is not enough! The Colonel admires Wickham – he is very popular in the regiment – and Lydia has had her head filled with romantic nonsense for a full twelvemonth. I do not believe I can trust her to hold the line, and I certainly do not trust Wickham!”

Madeline Gardiner cogitated for a few minutes and leaned forward a little. “Elizabeth, let me speak to your uncle

Gardiner. Perhaps he can suggest something to do. It would probably help if you gave me the letter to show him.”

Elizabeth nodded, choking down one last sob. “Very well, Aunt.”

/

“Well, Lizzy, I hope you have a fine time with your aunt and uncle,” Mrs. Bennet said, lavishly buttering her slice of bread, “though how you are to find a husband when you keep traipsing off to the wilds of Kent and Derbyshire is quite beyond my capacity to imagine. What is there of interest in trees and rocks and mountains?”

“Lizzy loves the outdoors, Mama,” Jane said gently. “You know that. She and our aunt and uncle will no doubt have a marvelous time together.”

“At least Lizzy is allowed to go *somewhere*,” Kitty whined. “Jane spent time in London earlier this year and Elizabeth was in Kent and now with the Gardiners, and Lydia is enjoying herself in Brighton! I never get to go anywhere! It is not fair!”

“Now, now,” Mrs. Bennet reproved. “You must not be jealous of Lydia. It is not her fault that she is so bright and pretty!”

“Elizabeth,” Mrs. Gardiner said, stepping into the dining room with her four children crowding at her heels, “are you ready to depart?”

Elizabeth took one last sip of her hot chocolate and rose hastily, along with Mr. Bennet and Jane, both of whom followed the Gardiners and Elizabeth outside to the waiting carriage.

“Have a wonderful trip,” Jane said with a fond embrace.

“Thank you, Jane.”

“I will miss you, my Lizzy,” Mr. Bennet declared, reaching out to grasp her hands in his own. “Promise me that you will not worry about your silly youngest sister.”

Elizabeth blinked back tears. “I cannot promise that, Father, but I will pray that you are correct and that she will be well.”

“She will,” her father assured her. “Brother, Sister, take good care of my Lizzy.”

“Of course we will,” Mrs. Gardiner said, bestowing last embraces on her children, who



would be looked after by two nursemaids and Jane. “Come along, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth climbed in hastily, fearful that her emotions would spill over at this last moment. She loved her aunt and uncle and had looked forward to this trip immensely, but she knew that the entire journey would be tainted by her fears for Lydia.

The carriage jolted into motion, and Elizabeth waved toward Jane and her father, the only members of her immediate family to see them off. Her little cousins were hopping up and down and screaming farewells until the carriage turned and Longbourn slipped out of sight.

“Elizabeth,” Mr. Gardiner said as soon as their conveyance had reached the main road, “your aunt told me of the letter from Lydia and your fears for her. We spoke at length and have decided that instead of going north, with your permission we will go south to Brighton to assess the situation.”

Elizabeth stared at her aunt and uncle in hopeful disbelief. “Are you quite certain? Aunt Gardiner, I know you have been longing to visit your old friends in Lambton for many years!”

“My dear Elizabeth,” her aunt said fondly, reaching forward to pat her knee reassuringly, “do you imagine either your uncle or I could enjoy our journey knowing you are terribly worried about your sister? The trip north will wait.”

Elizabeth burst into tears for the third time in two days. Really, when had she become such a watering pot? In the midst of her gratitude, she was aware of a throb of genuine fury at her father. It was not the Gardiners who should be taking responsibility for the honor and protection of the youngest Miss Bennet, but since Mr. Bennet had refused to do his fatherly duty, Lydia’s aunt and uncle were forced to sacrifice their own pleasures.

“Thank you,” she sobbed, wiping her face with her handkerchief. “I hope that I will find myself mistaken about the danger to Lydia, but I will feel so much better seeing her with my own eyes. She respects you both, I know, far more than she respects my father, and I daresay your presence will give her food for thought.”

“Of course,” Mr. Gardiner said soothingly. “Now since I know nothing about Brighton, we will be stopping in London for the day. I wish to consult with an

acquaintance about where we might stay during our sojourn there. I hope that one day will not matter.”

“No, I am certain it will not,” Elizabeth agreed, dizzy with relief.

/

*Darcy House*

*London*

“Mr. Darcy?”

Fitzwilliam Darcy, master of Pemberley, looked up from his desk at his butler and answered, “Yes, Hopkins?”

“Sir, a Mr. Gardiner has asked to see you, most urgently. I told him that you were not home to visitors, but he requested that I give you his card, with the assurance that he will depart if you do not choose to see him.”

Darcy rose to his feet with a puzzled frown and walked toward his butler with his hand outstretched. “I do not remember a Mr. Gardiner but...”

He looked down and read the words; Mr.

Edward Gardiner, Importer and Exporter, followed by an address in Cheapside. So his visitor was in trade. There was a slight buckle to the card and Darcy turned it over, only to have his breath catch in his throat at the words written there.

“Mrs. Bennet of Longbourn in Hertfordshire is my sister, and Miss Elizabeth Bennet is my niece. I wish to speak to you of a matter of importance.”

Elizabeth!

In an instant, Darcy’s thoughts flew back to three months previously, when he had proposed marriage to Elizabeth Bennet while the lady was visiting her friend, Mrs. Charlotte Collins in Kent. He had been irrevocably, reluctantly in love with Miss Bennet – she was beautiful, lively, intelligent, and determined, but her mother was a tradesman’s daughter, and her younger sisters entirely out of control. He had thought that he was doing her a great favor by offering his hand in marriage and had been entirely shocked, and yes, devastated, when she had rejected him out of hand.

“See him in,” Darcy rasped, noting absently that the hand holding the calling card

was shaking.

“Yes, sir.”

Darcy retreated to his desk, struggling to slow his breathing, to obtain some semblance of calm. Not a minute passed before the door opened again and Hopkins showed in a man of some five and thirty years, of average height and with an intelligent countenance, dressed in well-made but not overly fine clothing.

“Mr. Gardiner,” Hopkins intoned solemnly, and withdrew, shutting the door behind him.

“Mr. Darcy, I apologize for what is no doubt an unwarranted intrusion.”

“Not at all,” Darcy said hastily, “please do sit down.”

Both men did so and Gardiner leaned forward slightly. “Mr. Darcy, I will come straight to the point. I assume you remember my niece, Miss Elizabeth Bennet?”

Remember her? *Remember* her? She haunted him during the day, and his dreams were full of her fine eyes, her pleasing figure, her laugh...

“Yes, of course, Mr. Gardiner.”

“Elizabeth intercepted a letter from her

youngest sister, Miss Lydia, addressed to her sister Kitty, only yesterday. She is greatly disturbed at its contents because there are references to a Mr. George Wickham, whom Elizabeth tells me is a reprobate.”

Darcy gritted his teeth and confirmed, “He is a degenerate scoundrel.”

Gardiner nodded, pulled a letter out of his pocket, and handed it to Pemberley’s master. “Would you be kind enough to read this letter from my youngest niece, then? I know it is asking a great deal, but I wish to know your opinion as to whether Lydia is truly in danger.”

Darcy took the letter and read it with disquiet, which rapidly shifted to horror. He read it again, and once more, and then lifted his head to stare into his guest’s eyes. “Wickham will ruin her.”

Gardiner winced. “That is Lizzy’s concern, of course, but I admit to doubt. Certainly I am experienced enough to know that there are men who seduce young women, but Lydia is the daughter of a gentleman and the guest of Colonel Forster, the regiment commander. Would Wickham dare to do such a thing to my niece?”

Darcy leaned back and drummed his fingers absently on the desk. These were good questions, but...

“Wickham racks up debts wherever he goes,” he said finally. “He joined the militia regiment in November of last year, and it is now July. He has no doubt amassed hundreds of pounds in debts to shopkeepers and fellow officers, and if he repeats his former habits, he will shortly flee to avoid his creditors.”

Gardiner’s brow darkened ominously. “And what of my youngest niece?”

Darcy hesitated. He had enraged Elizabeth when he pointed out her family’s poor behavior, after all. “Mr. Gardiner, I would not wish to be discourteous regarding your sister’s family.”

His guest waved an irritable hand. “I am well aware of my sister’s foolishness and Lydia’s proclivities. Please, I beg of you, do not hesitate to speak openly as my only concern is the safety and credit of my niece, and by extension, her family.”

“Very well,” Darcy said, clasping his hands tightly in front of him. “Wickham has long looked upon women entirely selfishly. He considers heiresses possible sources of

wealth, and poorer women as a means of satisfying his more ... carnal ... desires. I am not aware that he has ever ruined a gentleman's daughter, but, with all due respect, Mr. Bennet has not shown himself inclined to either protect or direct his daughters."

"You are entirely right, sir. My dear wife and I have long mourned my brother's disinclination to stir himself from his library to rein in the excesses of his wife and younger daughters. In a way, it is quite a miracle that Jane and Elizabeth have turned out as well as they have."

Darcy swallowed hard. Yes, it was indeed a miracle, though based on the demeanor of the man sitting across from him, he guessed that the Gardiners had a great deal to do with the charming temperaments of the two eldest Misses Bennet.

"Wickham has always allowed his passions to rule him," Darcy continued gravely. "You are correct that to run away with a gentleman's daughter who is under the protection of his regiment commander is idiocy, but so is running through four thousand pounds in less than two years, and disdaining a valuable living in the church, and



a host of other things that he has already done. Wickham can never say no to his short term desires even if in the long run he suffers. Not that he has suffered much. He has managed to charm and fool many people, including my father, who could never see Wickham for who he was. Those around him suffer, not he himself.”

Edward Gardiner blew out a slow breath. “Thank you very much, Mr. Darcy. Mrs. Gardiner and Elizabeth and I were intending to take a holiday north, but given this information, we will go to Brighton instead. While we do not have the authority to remove Lydia from Brighton, we can at least provide some oversight. I greatly appreciate your willingness to give me a few minutes of your time, sir.”

“Mr. Gardiner,” Darcy urged, “please do not depart yet. I wish to help you in this matter of Wickham.”

The tradesman frowned in confusion. “Help us? Mr. Darcy, you have already done more than I expected. You have given us vital information and it is my duty to assist my sister’s family in the hope of preventing a scandal. It is not your concern.”

“It is mine,” Darcy insisted. “I ought to have exposed Wickham’s vile character in Meryton. I was too proud of myself and my name to lay open vital facts about the man’s instability. This is my fault.”

“It is the fault of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, sir,” Gardiner declared with a grim shake of his head as he rose to his feet. “They have neglected my nieces dreadfully. I thank you again, but I cannot...”

“Please, Mr. Gardiner, sit down. Did Miss Elizabeth inform you of the details of our interaction in Kent when we discussed Wickham?”

The man lifted a curious eyebrow and returned to his chair. “No, she did not, except to say that she challenged you regarding the church living which you supposedly withheld from the rogue.”

Darcy found his gaze dropping to stare at a tidy pile of correspondence. “I asked Miss Elizabeth to marry me, and she refused, citing my treatment of Wickham and her sister, Miss Bennet.”

Gardiner sucked in a sharp breath. “You made Elizabeth an offer?”

“I did.”

Darcy's guest ran his hand down his face wearily. "She neglected to tell me but that is no surprise; Elizabeth is obviously ashamed of her championship of the despicable lieutenant."

Darcy shook his head gloomily. "I am most at fault in the entire matter. I was proud and arrogant in my words and demeanor, and I should have told her earlier about Wickham."

"Be that as it may, sir, it is still not your concern now."

"It is, because I still love your niece very much," Darcy blurted out, lifting his gaze to observe Mr. Gardiner, his eyes compassionate, staring soberly at him. "I know I have no hope with Eliza ... with Miss Elizabeth, but I could not live with myself if she and her family came to ruin over the matter of my father's vile godson. I insist you allow me to help you in this matter. I have much experience with the man and connections in Brighton, which will make it far easier to protect Miss Lydia."

Edward Gardiner leaned back and nodded. "In that case, Mr. Darcy, I can only say yes, and thank you. Now you spoke of his debts; is the solution to our problem perhaps a

simple one? Might I buy up his debts and cast him into Marshalsea or the King's Bench prison?"

Darcy bit his lip. "In truth, I hold a number of vouchers for Wickham; he ran up debts in Lambton near Pemberley, trading on position as my father's godson. I could not bear to allow the merchants to suffer when he fled the area without paying."

Gardiner eyed him shrewdly and said, "You obviously have the means to cast the miscreant into debtor's prison; is that too harsh a punishment for your father's godson?"

Darcy groaned and confessed, "For many years, that was true. I have known for nearly a decade that Wickham is a contemptible, depraved individual, but my father loved him to the very end of his life and indeed, in my father's last days, Wickham could always make him laugh. That was, of course, artifice on my old playmate's part; Wickham made himself agreeable in the hopes of gaining more in my father's will. Now, yes, I am at peace with sending him away to Marshalsea, but..."

Darcy hesitated again and then said quickly, "The truth is that Wickham conspired with my young sister's companion last

summer, and Miss Darcy was convinced to believe herself in love and to agree to elope with the villain. By the very grace of God, I decided to visit Georgiana at Ramsgate before the couple fled to Gretna Greene, and my dear sister told me all. I threw Mrs. Younge and Wickham into the street, but Georgiana's reputation would be greatly damaged if word were to get out to polite society that she agreed to wed the rascal."

He stared at the older man, his expression agonized, and Mr. Gardiner nodded. "I entirely understand, Mr. Darcy. Your concern for your sister's reputation and well-being do you great credit. Do not be dismayed; I am confident that together we will find a way to deal with George Wickham which will not harm Miss Darcy in any way."

## Chapter 3

Elizabeth Bennet put down her book of poetry and stared at her uncle. “You called on Mr. Darcy? Oh, Uncle, how could you?”

“I thought he could provide useful insight into Wickham’s character, and given our conversation in the carriage this morning, Mr. Darcy is a most worthy young man, and entirely trustworthy.”

Edward Gardiner now bent a stern gaze on his niece and demanded, “My dear Lizzy, how could *you* fail to tell me the truth of the matter, that Mr. Darcy offered for you while you were staying with Mr. and Mrs. Collins in Kent?”

Mrs. Gardiner gasped aloud and scrutinized her niece intently; the girl’s eyes were now lowered in confusion, and her face was pink with embarrassment.

“My dear Elizabeth,” she murmured, “I had no idea.”

“Well, I certainly had no idea that he was in love with me,” the girl admitted. “He visited me one evening when most of the household was at Rosings for dinner, and I had

learned that very day that Mr. Darcy was the one who pressured Mr. Bingley to leave Jane behind. With that on my mind, and my foolish admiration of Mr. Wickham, I responded most harshly to Mr. Darcy's extremely rude proposal."

"Rude?" Mr. Gardiner said in amazement. "I found him entirely courteous and obliging."

Elizabeth huffed and said, "Well, then you caught him at a good moment, or he is very much altered. When we first met, he insulted my looks at the Meryton assembly by saying I was not 'handsome enough to dance with'. Then he stared at me and frowned at me..."

She blew out a slow breath and her shoulders slumped. "I misread him, of course. I thought he looked on me only to find fault, when he was actually falling in love with me. I realized after he gave me the letter..."

"Letter?" Gardiner asked sharply.

Elizabeth winced and nodded. "Yes, the day after he proposed and I refused, he handed me a letter describing his dealings with both Wickham and Mr. Bingley. Regarding Wickham, you know the truth; he is

a reprobate. Regarding Mr. Bingley, well, Mr. Darcy claimed that he did not think Jane cared for his friend and would only accept due to the entail on Longbourn. While I am exasperated that he thought he knew Jane's heart, it is true that she is so serene that I can understand his mistake."

"It seems to me that Mr. Bingley is more at fault," Mrs. Gardiner said shrewdly. "If he truly cared for Jane, he would not have left her behind without so much as a word of farewell."

Elizabeth sighed. "He and Jane are much alike in that they both believe the best of others. He and Mr. Darcy are close friends, and the latter admitted that he has great influence over his younger friend. But please, we must return to the matter at hand. Why did you go to Mr. Darcy with what is a personal family matter, Uncle?"

Mr. Gardiner shrugged and said. "I hoped, though did not anticipate, that the man would be willing to provide insight into whether Wickham is truly a danger. He was, as I said, far more welcoming and helpful than I had any reason to expect given the disparity of our positions in society. Furthermore, he has absolutely insisted that he be permitted to



help protect Lydia from the scoundrel. He claims that it is his responsibility by honor since he failed to warn the inhabitants of Meryton that they were welcoming a wolf into their midst.”

“How can he help?” his wife asked, glancing worriedly at Elizabeth, whose hands were clasped tightly in her lap.

“He knows Wickham’s proclivities and inclinations far more than we do, dear wife. He also tells me that he has a connection in Brighton who can provide information about where best to stay. It would be better to rent a house, if possible, and Darcy’s friend may be able to provide information about possible residences. Mr. Darcy is on his way to Brighton even now to call on his friend and will send us an express as quickly as possible with suggestions.”

“Surely we cannot impose on a friend of the Darcys in any way!” Elizabeth exclaimed, her face crimson with embarrassment.

“Elizabeth,” Mr. Gardiner said sympathetically, sitting down and wrapping an arm around his favorite niece, “I understand that you feel uncomfortable and even ashamed over what passed between you

and Mr. Darcy, but this is a dire situation for you and your sisters. If the man is willing to assist us, then we must accept his help.”

Elizabeth moaned but nodded. “Very well, Uncle.”

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*Hartford Mansion*  
*Marine Parade Street*  
*Brighton*

“Fitzwilliam Darcy!” Lady Amelia Hartford exclaimed, rising to her feet and bustling forward. “You are a sight for sore eyes! How long has it been?”

Darcy stepped forward, bowed to Lady Amelia, and admitted, “I fear it has been at least four years, Madam, which is far too long.”

“Better today than next month or next year,” the woman said cheerfully, inspecting her visitor with interest. “Darcy, you look more like your father every time I see you. How are you and dear Georgiana?”

“We are well, Lady Amelia. And how are you and your family?”

“Oh, very well indeed. Do sit down, Darcy, and we will have tea. Marianna! Tea!”

A maid who had been working nearby bustled out of the room, and Darcy and Lady Amelia took their places on facing chairs. Darcy sank down appreciatively; the chairs were extremely comfortable, which was not always a given in wealthy homes. At Rosings, for example, the furniture was chosen for looks as opposed to comfort, and he often ached after a few hours of listening to his aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, ramble on about everything under the sun.

“Yes, we are very well,” Lady Amelia continued happily. “Michael’s wife gave birth six months ago to their longed-for son and heir, and by the grace of God, Gabriel is mostly recovered.”

Darcy frowned. “Recovered?”

“Oh, my dear, perhaps you did not hear? Poor Gabriel was hit by a bullet during the battle of Corunna and lost his left arm. Indeed, we all feared he would lose his life; thankfully, he survived.”

Darcy shook his head. “I am so sorry,

Lady Amelia. If I had known I would have sent a letter of sympathy. I cannot imagine how I failed to learn of such a catastrophe.”

“Now do not fret,” the lady said kindly as Marianna came in with a tea tray. “You like tea with milk, if I remember correctly. No, I daresay you were terribly busy with Pemberley at the time. Your dear father passed on too soon, as did Lady Anne. I still miss her.”

Darcy swallowed. “As do I, Lady Amelia. She was a wonderful woman.”

“She was my closest friend the year that we came out into society,” the lady mused, her eyes faraway, “and I give her credit for my marriage. Your father, while a very wealthy gentleman, was not a member of the nobility and Anne could have reached higher, but she loved George Darcy and insisted that she be allowed to marry him.”

“I did not know that,” Darcy responded in astonishment.

“Oh yes, it was something of a scandal at the time,” Lady Amelia said with a chuckle. “Of course, your father was very eligible, but Lady Anne’s father was extremely ambitious. Your mother was usually a soft, gentle

creature, but she refused to be swayed when your grandfather attempted to pressure her into a marriage with the eldest son of the Marquis of Rufford. At any rate, she prevailed in the end and I, taking my cue from her, chose to marry my Aaron, and I never regretted it even if I lost him too soon.”

“He was a fine man.”

“Indeed. But come, Darcy, I suspect you are not here merely to engage an old woman in her memories of the past. What brings you to Brighton?”

Darcy leaned forward a little. “I have a favor to ask, Lady Amelia. I have some friends who are coming to Brighton on a matter of great urgency, and they need a place to stay. I know you have many acquaintances in the city; do you have any suggestions?”

Lady Amelia took a long sip of tea and smiled at her visitor. “Perhaps, Darcy, perhaps. Please tell me about your friends.”

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Elizabeth took in a deep breath of moist sea air and straightened to her full height,

relishing the ability to stretch out after many hours in the carriage. The trip from London to Brighton had been a hot one, and their hired carriage was not well sprung. She felt both overly warm and excessively jolted, but her heart felt lighter. At least she and her family were in Brighton now, and with the help of Mr. Darcy, perhaps Lydia could be kept safe.

Elizabeth gazed up at the house of Mr. Darcy's acquaintance, a Lady Amelia Hartford, while Mr. Gardiner handed his wife out of their conveyance. The mansion was large but not ornate, and built of red brick, which reminded her fondly of Longbourn. Elizabeth thoroughly admired the flower beds which adorned the property and provided pleasing colors amidst the small, well-tended lawn. The lady was no doubt wealthy and well-connected, and Elizabeth shrank from bothering her, but they had little choice. Brighton was teeming with visitors eager to bathe in the ocean and there were many militia regiments in residence; it would be impossible to find lodgings without guidance from someone knowledgeable.

"Shall we, Lizzy?" her uncle suggested, and Elizabeth followed her aunt and uncle along the paved path and up a half flight of

stone steps to the front door, which opened as they approached.

The middle aged butler who stood within bowed and inquired, "Mr. Gardiner?"

"I am Mr. Gardiner, yes."

"Very good, sir. Please, will you and your party accompany me to the conservatory? Lady Amelia is waiting for you there."

Elizabeth silently followed her aunt and uncle through wood paneled corridors. In spite of her anxiety over Lydia and Mr. Darcy, she could not help but admire the décor of this house. Unlike Rosings in Kent, where Lady Catherine and Miss Anne de Bourgh dwelled in opulent splendor, this mansion was a home, with elegant furnishings and a few well-placed, beautiful paintings. Based on the style of this place, she thought she would like Lady Amelia.

"Her ladyship is waiting within," the butler said, gesturing for the party to enter the conservatory. Elizabeth stepped in and then stopped, her mouth falling open with wonder. The greenhouse was of medium size and filled with a variety of plants, but it was not that which provoked her surprise and awe. Flitting

and floating in the currents of the air were at least a dozen butterflies of a variety of colors, shapes and sizes.

“It is glorious!” she exclaimed without thinking, which provoked a chuckle from the woman who rose from a stool to welcome them. She was some fifty years of age with blue eyes and dark hair streaked copiously with silver, and while not conventionally handsome, her smile was bright and her eyes welcoming. Lady Amelia’s dress, a simple one made out of brown cambric, was rather soiled at the moment.

“I am glad you appreciate it,” the woman said, quickly wiping dirt from her hands with a wet cloth, and then stepped forward gracefully. “I am Lady Amelia Hartford, and you must be Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner and Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

“We are,” Mr. Gardiner said with a slight bow. “Thank you very much for giving us a few minutes of your time, Lady Amelia.”

“Oh, I am delighted, I assure you,” Lady Amelia told her guests. “Miss Bennet, you are even more handsome then Darcy told me. It is no wonder that the poor man fell quite in love with you.”



Elizabeth turned entirely crimson as she tried in vain to respond, eliciting an apologetic grimace from her hostess. "My dear Miss Bennet, I do apologize for embarrassing you. I confess that I think your refusal was very good for Darcy; he is a dear boy, but rather inclined to take himself too seriously, and he admitted that he did an excessively poor job of offering for you. But come, I can see this topic is a painful one. I am certain you are somewhat fatigued after your journey from London. My maid will show you to your rooms while I change into something more appropriate."

The Gardiners exchanged bewildered glances and Mrs. Gardiner asked softly, "Our rooms, Lady Amelia?"

"Oh, my apologies! One of my rarer butterflies, a Glanville Fritallary, just hatched from its chrysalis, and in the excitement I am more scatter-brained than usual. I hope you and your niece will accept my invitation to stay here. There is plenty of space."

"We cannot impose on you in such a way," Mr. Gardiner insisted, glancing worriedly at his niece.

"My dear Mr. Gardiner, it would be no imposition at all," the lady asserted. "My

husband has been gone these four years, and my children are grown and living elsewhere. I find myself quite lonely. Besides, with numerous militia regiments in Brighton at the moment, it may be impossible to find lodgings on short notice.”

Her three visitors looked at one another uneasily and Elizabeth said cautiously, “Will Mr. Darcy...”

“Be staying here as well?” her hostess finished brightly. “Indeed, he will, though he is not here at present. He is the son of Lady Anne Darcy, who was one of my closest friends; I assure you Darcy will not importune you in any way, Miss Bennet.”

“Oh, I know he will not, but,” Elizabeth began, and then shut her mouth firmly. She was being ridiculous. Lydia needed to be saved from Mr. Wickham, and Elizabeth could certainly survive interacting with her erstwhile suitor.

“Thank you very much for your kindness, Lady Amelia,” Mrs. Gardiner said.

## Chapter 4

“Please tell me about your sister Lydia,” Lady Amelia requested as the Gardiners and Elizabeth enjoyed a small nuncheon in a room adjacent to the conservatory. The connecting wall to the greenhouse was made of glass, which Elizabeth found quite distracting. The plants and flowers were lovely enough, but the butterflies, with their gossamer wings and effortless flight, were glorious.

With difficulty, Elizabeth tore her gaze away from a diaphanous insect fluttering nearby and looked bravely into her hostess’s eyes. “My sister Lydia is sixteen years old, tall for her age, and handsome. She is also volatile, brash, flirtatious, and extremely foolish. Sadly, she has been given over to the reckless pursuit of officers since last autumn, when a militia regiment settled in our home town of Meryton. Here in Brighton, with an entire camp full of soldiers and without even the oversight of her elder sisters, I have no doubt she is running quite amok.”

Her hostess took a bite of cucumber sandwich, her expression interested but not condemning, and Elizabeth felt herself relax a

little. It had taken great courage to admit her youngest sister's failings, but Lady Amelia was a kind woman and Darcy trusted her.

It was odd to realize that Darcy's trust meant a great deal. The master of Pemberley was definitely growing in her own estimation if his faith gave Elizabeth the confidence to reveal her family's deficiencies.

"I presume," Lady Amelia asked carefully, "based on the situation, that your parents are rather neglectful?"

Elizabeth blew out a slow breath and nodded unhappily. "I fear so. I do not know what Mr. Darcy has told you of our situation..."

"Very little, I assure you. He told me that your sister was in danger from Mr. George Wickham, who is quite the rogue, and that you are sufficiently concerned that you chose to come to Brighton to check on her instead of traveling north to Derbyshire."

"Yes. I intercepted a letter from Lydia to Kitty, my next youngest sister, and Lydia claims that she and Wickham are in love and are planning to elope to Gretna Green. I showed the letter to my father, who refused to take it seriously. His view is that Wickham

would never marry a girl as poor as my sister, and thus the love affair is entirely in Lydia's head."

"But you are concerned that Wickham might run off with Lydia and ruin her?" Lady Amelia inquired.

Again, Elizabeth could only be grateful for her hostess's calm tone. "I am. It seems dreadful to think that my sister could be so wanting in delicacy and virtue to consent to such a thing, but she is very young, and badly taught. My mother encourages her in her coquettish conduct and my father has chosen to laugh at my younger sisters' behavior rather than rein them in. It is a hard thing for me to admit, but I was also deceived by Mr. Wickham. He is exceptionally charming."

"Be at ease, Miss Bennet," Lady Amelia said in a soothing tone. "You are certainly not the only young woman in England to have her head turned by a pleasing man like Wickham, nor are you the only one with an indifferent father. I met Wickham but once, some ten years ago when my family visited Pemberley, and even then he had remarkable charm. Some men, and women, for that matter, are gifted with a strange magnetism; when they use it for good, they are a blessing to others.

When they are selfish or cruel, they do great mischief.”

“I thought very well of him myself,” Elizabeth admitted with downcast eyes. “I listened to his tale of woe regarding Mr. Darcy with a remarkable lack of insight. I am ashamed of myself.”

“The important thing, dear Lizzy, is to learn from such an experience,” Mrs. Gardiner interposed, speaking for the first time. “Lady Amelia, we are hoping that Lydia will consent to remove from Colonel Forster’s house, but we would not care to impose on you further.”

“I wish to be imposed upon, Mrs. Gardiner! By all means, if you can convince the youngest Miss Bennet to remove here, I would be delighted. Do you believe she will be interested or will her attraction to Wickham tempt her to stay with the Forsters?”

Elizabeth sighed and said, “I have no doubt she will refuse to come with us, and we have no authority to make her. She is a little afraid of my aunt and uncle and finds my harping on propriety to be irritating. No, as much as I would like her here in safety, it will not be easy.”

Lady Amelia smiled reassuringly. “My

dear Miss Bennet, do not distress yourself. I am quite confident that we can find a way to protect your sister from her own foolishness. Indeed, I suspect that a subtle approach might bring exactly the result we desire.”

The door to the sitting room opened and the butler stepped in with Darcy at his heels. Elizabeth found herself on her feet in a moment, her breath quick, her face pink with discomfort. She had dreaded this moment when she would lay eyes on the man who had asked for her hand in marriage. It was painful and humiliating given that her accusations at the time of his offer had been almost entirely without merit.

Darcy looked ruffled as well, but he managed a courteous bow to the company and said, “Good afternoon, Mr. Gardiner, Miss Bennet, Lady Amelia. Mr. Gardiner, would you be kind enough to introduce me to your wife?”

“It would be my pleasure,” Gardiner said with a sympathetic glance at his obviously embarrassed niece. “My wife, Mrs. Gardiner. My dear, this is Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley.”

Darcy bowed and Madeline Gardiner curtsied, and the lady smiled cheerfully at her

new acquaintance. “Mr. Darcy, it is an honor to meet you at last. I spent the eight years before my marriage in Lambton near Pemberley, and have very fond memories of my years in Derbyshire.”

The gentleman, who was struggling to maintain his equanimity in the face of Miss Bennet, who was still so beautiful, so vibrant, so alive, latched onto these words with the enthusiasm of a drowning man. “I have been to Lambton so many times, madam! It is a delightful little town.”

“Please, let us all sit down,” Lady Amelia suggested, elegantly steering her guests into various seats. When all were in their appropriate places, Darcy was next to Mrs. Gardiner, who happily engaged him in conversation about Derbyshire, and Elizabeth was next to Lady Amelia. Elizabeth could feel that her color was heightened, but her breathing had, at least, calmed down.

“You need not worry, Miss Bennet,” Lady Amelia said in an amused tone. “Darcy will not bite you.”

“It is very awkward,” Elizabeth insisted, her eyes downcast.

“I suppose it is,” the lady said, “but you



will grow accustomed in time to one another. But come, let us change the subject to something less controversial. Have you ever been to the sea before?”

“I have not,” Elizabeth said enthusiastically. “You have a remarkable view of the sea, Lady Amelia, and the sight is absolutely breathtaking.”

“We will visit the beach together soon,” her hostess promised. “I have walked the pebbly shore of Brighton many times, but it never grows old.”

“Do you think we will have time for such things, given that we must intervene in my sister’s life?”

“Oh yes. Indeed, my dear Miss Bennet, I have an idea about the best way to manage the situation with Miss Lydia. Sometimes, a frontal approach is not the ideal mode of attack.”

“I suppose that is true enough. Now do you mind if I ask you about your conservatory, madam? I have never seen anything like your butterflies.”

The lady’s face lit up as if she had swallowed a star. “I daresay you will have trouble silencing me! My butterflies are quite

my favorite topic in the world. I grew up in the country, you see, and have long been fascinated not just with the beauty of butterflies, but with their life cycle. Indeed, my heroine is Lady Eleanor Glanville, a British naturalist of some renown who died a hundred years ago. She named the Glanville Fritillary...”

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Dinner was complete and the ladies had departed for the drawing room, leaving Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Darcy to their port. The latter felt strangely exhausted, and it was no great mental feat to attribute his fatigue to Miss Bennet. Their interactions had been courteous, and over dinner she had been provoked to laugh twice. His mind still rung with those musical peals, and he realized that he was as in love with her today as he ever had been.

“Mr. Darcy,” Gardiner said, “may I ask whether you have further thoughts on how to manage George Wickham?”

This sobered Darcy immediately and he turned his attention on the tradesman. “I

spoke to Lady Amelia's solicitor today, and he assured me that he will have one of his underlings begin seeking out Wickham's debts and buying them up. I will pay for a writ for debt on the man, though surreptitiously, of course."

"Nonsense, sir," Gardiner declared, shaking his head. "I will pay for the writ; this is a family matter, and you have already helped us immensely by introducing us to Lady Amelia, who has welcomed us with charm and kindness. I insist on providing the monies for the writ."

Darcy opened his mouth in protest, then closed it when his companion lifted a quelling finger. "Come, Mr. Darcy, if our positions were reversed, would you be willing for me to pay to save *your* niece?"

The gentleman heaved a reluctant sigh and admitted, "I would not, of course. Very well, you will pay the solicitor for his services. I may well disburse some of my own funds in other matters; do keep in mind that we both will sleep far easier when Wickham is dealt with in a firm manner."

"Of course. I suppose it will take some time to collect Wickham's debts, if there are

any.”

“There are, of course,” Darcy asserted. “Wickham always leaves debts wherever he goes and he has been in Brighton for some weeks. All the same, you are correct; it will take at least a week, possibly more, to find the specific shopkeepers who have extended him credit, buy them up, and prepare the writ which will allow his arrest for indebtedness. In the meantime, we must keep Miss Lydia safe. We will arrange for men to watch Wickham until his arrest, but it is not trivial to keep a close eye on one lieutenant among a sea of red coats.”

“I believe that Lady Amelia has some ideas on how best to manage the protection of my niece,” Mr. Gardiner said, “and based on my limited knowledge of the lady, I have no doubt that her plans are excellent ones.”

## Chapter 5

Mrs. Harriet Forster glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece and then at Lydia Bennet, who was slowly munching on a piece of toast. “Lydia, are you not finished breaking your fast? I received word that *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is waiting for me at the circulating library and I wish to obtain it as soon as possible!”

Lydia swallowed her bite, took a sip of tea, and tilted her chin winsomely. “Harriet, dearest Harriet, can we not wait two hours? You know that very few of the officers are up and about this early, and dear Mr. Wickham always sleeps until at least eleven. We have far more chance of meeting him and the other officers if we wait.”

Mrs. Forster rubbed her forehead in frustration. She was very fond of Lydia, who was lively, fun and handsome, but the girl had little understanding of Harriet’s responsibilities as wife of a colonel.

“No,” the lady explained patiently, “we must go now. I am to have tea with Mrs. Allen and Mrs. Pembroke this afternoon.”

“Oh, must we, Harriet?” Lydia whined. “They are so old and dull!”

“They are rather dull,” Harriet admitted, “but their husbands serve alongside Colonel Forster and he particularly wishes for me to stay on good terms with them. You can stay in your room, if you wish.”

“I will,” Lydia said decidedly, patting her mouth with a napkin and rising to her feet. “Very well, if we must go to the library now, we must, though I am quite heartbroken I will not see Mr. Wickham and Captain Denny.”

The door opened and a maid entered and dropped a curtsy. “Madam, a Lady Amelia Hartford is here to see you.”

Harriet Forster stared at the girl in astonishment. “Lady Amelia Hartford?”

“Yes. She is waiting with her companion in the drawing room.”

“Thank you, Charity,” the young Mrs. Forster responded and looked over at Lydia rather helplessly. “Do you know of a Lady Amelia, Lydia?”

“No,” the youngest Miss Bennet said carelessly, “but why does it matter? She probably is collecting donations for the church

or some such thing.”

“Do come along, Lydia, do!” her friend begged. “I do not have much experience with members of the nobility.”

Lydia nodded agreeably and sashayed out of the room. She quite adored Harriet Forster, but her friend was a timid mouse at times. There was nothing to be afraid of, after all.

She led the way into the drawing room where the visitors were waiting and halted in amazement.

“Lizzy!”

Elizabeth, who had been talking softly with Lady Amelia, hurried forward to throw her arms around her sister. “Lydia, how wonderful to see you!”

“Oh Lizzy, I am glad to see you too, but what are you doing here? Are Mother and Kitty here as well?”

“No, oh, Mrs. Forster, good morning!”

Harriet Forster smiled nervously at Elizabeth; on the one hand, she was pleased that one of her visitors was an acquaintance from Meryton in Hertfordshire, where the militia had previously been stationed. On the

other hand, Elizabeth Bennet had always proven a mystery to young Mrs. Forster; the second Miss Bennet was prone to speaking casually about books and Greek philosophy and the like, which quite hurt Harriet's head.

"Good morning, Miss Bennet," Mrs. Forster responded softly, her eyes shifting to the well-dressed matron standing patiently near the bay window which looked out into a small garden.

"Miss Bennet, will you kindly introduce me to your sister and her friend?" Lady Amelia requested.

"Certainly! Lady Amelia, my sister, Miss Lydia Bennet, and her gracious hostess, Mrs. Forster. Colonel Forster commands the regiment which was recently in Meryton, near our home of Longbourn. Lydia, Mrs. Forster, Lady Amelia Hartford."

Lydia and Mrs. Forster curtsied to the lady, and Amelia Hartford nodded agreeably in return as she considered the youngest Miss Bennet. Mrs. Bennet must be handsome indeed to pass on such beautiful features to her daughters. It was no wonder that a man like George Wickham was attracted by the buxom form and engaging features of Miss



Lydia, even if the scoundrel would calmly ruin the girl without a twinge of conscience.

“Please, will you not sit down and join us for tea?” Mrs. Forster said as Charity entered with a tray.

Elizabeth and Lady Amelia took seats near an open window, through which flowed a slight breeze. Elizabeth found herself vigorously cooling herself with her fan; Colonel Forster’s hired house was far better than the barracks allotted for most of the militia officers and men, but it was still a substantial distance from the sea and very warm on this July day.

“Lizzy,” Lydia demanded as soon as she had captured a scone from the tray, “why are you here? Did Papa relent and bring the rest of the family to Brighton?”

“No,” Elizabeth answered, nodding her thanks at her hostess for her cup of tea. “No, our aunt and uncle Gardiner were going to tour Derbyshire with me as their guest, but at the last minute decided that we would prefer to go to the seashore than to set out on a more arduous journey through the northern counties. I had heard through Kitty that you are greatly enjoying Brighton and we decided

to come here.”

She took a sip of tea, pleased that she had spoken the absolute truth without revealing their true reason for coming to Brighton.

“Oh Lizzy, you will have so much fun!” Lydia squealed in excitement. “Harriet and I see officers every day, and there are dances almost every week! Of course, aunt and uncle Gardiner do not care much for dancing but perhaps you can hire a carriage, or perhaps you can stay here with the Forsters...”

Lady Amelia was taken aback at this gauche display; it was incredibly rude of the girl to invite her sister to stay without giving Mrs. Forster a chance to convey an invitation. Young Mrs. Forster, who was very young indeed – what had the colonel been thinking to marry a child in her teens? – looked taken aback, as did Elizabeth, who was obviously uncomfortable with her sister’s impulsive speech.

“Thanks to the introduction of a mutual acquaintance, Miss Bennet is staying with me,” Lady Amelia explained, “along with her aunt and uncle Gardiner. My home is only a few minutes walk from the Old Steine Green,

which is a delightful place for a stroll and near enough to the Prince's Marine Pavilion to enjoy a splendid view of His Highness's abode here in Brighton."

"Oh, Lady Amelia," Mrs. Forster asked excitedly, "have you ever met the Prince Regent himself?"

"Certainly," the lady responded. "My family is a well-established one, and we have been invited to more than one party in the Pavilion."

"What an honor!" Harriet Forster said, obviously awestruck.

"Yes, indeed. Well, I am sure you ladies have your own pursuits for the day so Miss Bennet and I will be departing. I will be sending you an invitation soon for dinner at my mansion, Mrs. Forster. Are there any days that are particularly convenient for Colonel Forster, Miss Lydia, and you?"

The lady of the house could hardly speak in astonishment. "You ... you wish to invite ... us?"

"Of course, Mrs. Forster! We would be honored to have you and your husband and guest visit us, and I am certain Miss Bennet would enjoy spending time with Miss Lydia."

“Indeed I would,” Elizabeth declared with a warm smile at her sister, who was looking more bewildered than anything else.

“We are free every evening except Thursday this week,” Harriet said hesitantly, “and even on Thursday I daresay the colonel can cancel his dinner with ...”

“That will not be necessary,” Lady Amelia assured her. “No, I believe Wednesday will work well, but I will send a formal invitation soon. Well, Miss Bennet, I believe we must be going. Colonel Fitzwilliam should be arriving in time for dinner and I wish to consult with my cook as the dear man has a great fondness for fruit tarts. I would not wish to disappoint the colonel by not giving my cook sufficient time to secure the required ingredients.”

“Who is Colonel Fitzwilliam?” Lydia asked hopefully.

“He is the nephew of a dear friend of mine,” Lady Amelia explained, “and a colonel in the Regulars as well as a charming man. You will meet him at dinner, along with my son, a retired army man.”

“We look forward to it very much,” Mrs. Forster said meekly.

“Until Wednesday evening, then. Mrs. Forster, Miss Lydia, it was pleasant to meet you both.”

Elizabeth and Lady Amelia swept out of the Forsters’ hired house and into the Hartford carriage, and a moment later the matching black horses were trotting back toward the wealthier section of town.

“I believe that went well,” the older woman said in a satisfied tone. “Mrs. Forster was obviously pleased at the idea of visiting a member of the aristocracy, and Miss Lydia seems quite excited to meet Colonel Fitzwilliam.”

“I did not know that the Colonel was coming to Brighton,” Elizabeth said diffidently.

“Oh my dear, I do apologize! I have had so many conversations of late and had forgotten you were not present for that one. Darcy sent an express to the colonel only yesterday requesting that he come to Brighton. Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam is the second son to the Earl of Matlock and Miss Darcy’s other guardian...”

“I am aware,” Elizabeth explained hastily. “I know the Colonel; he accompanied

Mr. Darcy to Rosings a few months ago and I met him while I was visiting my friend, Mrs. Collins.”

“Oh! Is Richard aware that Mr. Darcy proposed marriage to you?”

“I do not know, Lady Amelia. Given that Mr. Darcy seems a private man, I would think not, but it is possible; he and the Colonel are good friends.”

“The very best of friends,” Amelia Hartford asserted, “and more brothers than cousins in some ways, though their characters are dissimilar. I apologize again for not informing you of his arrival. Do you like him?”

“Oh, pray do not be concerned. Yes, I like Colonel Fitzwilliam very much indeed, and I understand that as Miss Darcy’s other guardian, he would wish to be here to look after his cousins’ interests.”

Amelia Hartford bent a worried look on her young friend. “Do you believe Richard likes you very much too?”

Elizabeth was briefly confused and then chuckled. “If you mean, is he in any way attached to me, certainly not. We dealt with one another very well in Kent, but he made it

clear that he must marry for money and we Bennets are, regrettably, without substantial dowries.”

Lady Amelia leaned back in some relief; it would be extraordinarily awkward if Darcy and Fitzwilliam were fighting for the hand of the fair Elizabeth. “Yes, I fear that as the second son of an earl, Richard is used to a rather lavish lifestyle.”

“I entirely understand his perspective,” her young friend said reassuringly. “Indeed, I look forward to seeing him very much.”

“I am glad,” her hostess said and then, thinking over the various people coming and going, and young Miss Lydia, and Wickham, and an uneasy Darcy, declared, “I believe I am going to enjoy myself very much over the next week. I also relish that my second son, Gabriel, will be joining us today at my request. He lives only some fifteen miles away at a small estate, but he is very much a man who enjoys the country, and rarely comes to Brighton during the summer.”

“Does he enjoy hunting?” Elizabeth asked politely.

“He does not,” her hostess explained decidedly, “though he used to be an excellent

shot. He is a former army man, my dear, and lost his left arm in the Battle of Corunna three years ago. He is now retired and has a passion for beekeeping, while also diligently overseeing his estate of Beehaven.”

“Oh, Lady Amelia, I am so sorry to hear of such a grievous injury!”

“It was most distressing at the time,” the lady responded, a shadow darkening her countenance, “but he survived it when so many men did not. It is well to remember, Miss Bennet, that we owe much to the brave men who are fighting the Tyrant in Europe. Gabriel gave the Crown his arm; many men gave their lives.”



## Chapter 6

Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam of the Regulars guided his horse down a cobbled street and through the open gate of the stable yard behind the Hartford mansion. He pulled his steed to a halt and gazed down at the familiar gentleman waiting for him.

“Darcy!” Richard Fitzwilliam exclaimed as he swung down from his horse and handed the reins to an eager stable boy. “This is a surprise! Are you riding out somewhere? I had hoped to speak with you as soon as possible.”

“I am not leaving,” Darcy said, and lapsed into silence. He waited for the boy to lead away his cousin’s horse and then grasped his cousin’s arm, leading him out of the Hartford stable yard, down a side path, and into a walled yard behind the mansion. They sat on a wooden bench situated under a spreading elm tree.

“I wanted to talk to you privately,” he explained, letting go of Richard’s arm and turning to face him squarely. “The situation is rather volatile and I would not wish you to rush into battle, so to speak, without adequate

information. Thank you for coming so promptly, by the way.”

Richard’s expression was cheerful, but his eyes were watchful. “I assure you, Darcy, that your mention of Wickham was enough to make me eager to ask for leave from my general. The wretch is here in Brighton?”

“He is,” Darcy admitted. “He joined a militia regiment last autumn, which was formerly stationed in Meryton in Hertfordshire. Miss Elizabeth Bennet’s family dwells in Longbourn near Meryton, and thus Miss Elizabeth has been acquainted with Wickham for many months.”

Now Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam looked appalled. “Is she ... friendly with the man?”

“She was, but now she is not. We argued over Wickham back in Kent when I ... I ... made her an offer of marriage.”

The military man started, his mouth gaping in shock. “What did you say?” he demanded weakly.

“I asked Miss Bennet to marry me,” Darcy repeated rather miserably.

Richard shook his head hard as if to loosen cobwebs and then asked patiently, “When are you to be married?”

“We are not,” his cousin responded with a tragic grimace. “She refused me.”

“Because of Wickham? You cannot be serious! She is a sensible young woman, and you are one of the most eligible men in the kingdom!”

“She is not sensible, do you not see?” Darcy responded passionately. “That is why I wish to marry her! She is determined to marry a man she can honor and respect and love, and I am not that man! She was furious over my supposed treatment of Wickham, yes, but she also had harsh but valid words over my conduct toward her and her family, and she was furious at my interference in Charles Bingley’s pursuit of her elder sister, Miss Jane Bennet.”

The colonel paled noticeably and took a horrified step backwards. “Bingley thought he was in love with Miss Bennet’s sister? It was she of whom you referred when you said you had saved your friend from the inconveniences of a most imprudent marriage?”

“Yes,” Darcy admitted gloomily. “Somehow Miss Bennet learned of my interference...”

“I told her myself,” Colonel Fitzwilliam

declared with the mien of a man facing a firing squad. "I am so very sorry, Darcy; I came upon her during a ramble on the day before we left Rosings and we fell into conversation. The topic of Bingley came up, and I told her of your intervention in his affairs. I had no idea I was speaking of her sister."

Darcy sighed miserably. "That explains both her headache that evening which prevented her from attending dinner at Rosings, and a portion of her outrage at me. I daresay I could not have chosen a worse time to make my offer. At any rate, we quarreled and I left in turmoil; that night, I wrote a letter explaining my actions, and she accepted, at least, that I was not at fault in my dealings with Wickham."

The colonel's jaw clenched and he shook his head. "That was risky, to give a letter to Miss Bennet. I presume you did not speak of Georgiana's folly?"

"I did. I had to make it clear what kind of man Wickham truly is. You need not fear; Miss Bennet is entirely trustworthy. Indeed, I have reason to be additionally grateful for the letter, because it helped Miss Bennet better understand the situation here in Brighton."

“Which is?”

“Miss Lydia, the youngest of the Bennet sisters, is currently the guest of Colonel Forster, commander of the militia regiment in which Wickham serves, and his very young wife. Miss Bennet intercepted a letter from Miss Lydia to Miss Kitty, the second youngest sister, in which Miss Lydia said she plans to elope with Wickham because naturally, the foolish child believes herself to be in love with the rogue. Miss Elizabeth took fright since she knows Wickham to be a vile seducer, and she and her uncle and aunt rushed to London, where her uncle consulted me, and now we are all in Brighton to protect the girl from herself, and to deal once and for all with Wickham.”

The colonel sat back on the bench and digested this thoughtfully before turning to look back at Darcy. “What of their father, Mr. Bennet? Why is he not here?”

Darcy scowled and said, “I fear Mr. Bennet is a very lax father, and far more inclined to focus on his own comfort than on the safety and well-being of his daughters. Miss Bennet tried to alert him to the danger, but apparently her father insisted that Wickham would not bother to marry a

penniless gentleman's daughter, and he refused to stir himself. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, uncle and aunt to the Bennet daughters, are a more diligent and honorable couple. Mrs. Gardiner grew up in Lambton, as it happens. I like and admire them very much, and also confess to shame at my own attitude toward Miss Bennet's relations and connections. Mr. Gardiner is a tradesman, but is far more a gentleman than many a true gentleman."

Richard nodded slowly, his eyes narrowed, and said, "If I understand the situation, you wish to protect Miss Lydia Bennet from running off with Wickham?"

"Yes, and I intend to put Wickham away for good by buying up his debts and casting him into Marshalsea or King's Bench. However, the scoundrel has a sixth sense for when his creditors are closing in. He may well attempt to flee and Miss Lydia might be foolish enough to run away with him. He will, of course, have no compunction about promising marriage without any intentions of following through."

"Is the man being watched?" Richard demanded, rising to his feet with clenched fists and agitation in his bearing.

“He is,” Darcy promised. “Lady Amelia’s solicitor provided the names of several reliable men. I do not believe Wickham will slip through our grasp.”

Richard Fitzwilliam, second son of an earl, bared his teeth in a thoroughly feral manner and said, “I look forward to dealing with the miscreant as he deserves, Cousin. Now, what can I do to help?”

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George Wickham glanced around Mrs. Forster’s sitting room, his gaze settling briefly on a mother-of-pearl snuff box placed next to a set of fine ceramic figurines on the mantle. A delicately carved epergne sat on a nearby table, with an exquisite painting of a pineapple fastened to the wall above it. The decorations in the room were an odd assortment, with their only area of commonality being that they were valuable. Colonel Forster was the second son of a wealthy gentleman and his wife, young Mrs. Forster, had brought a handsome dowry into her marriage. It was entirely unfair that so many in Wickham’s orbit had far more ready

money than he did.

“I do hope that we will see you at the assembly at the Castile Inn tonight?” Captain Denny asked Mrs. Forster, distracting Wickham from his dark musings.

Mrs. Forster colored a little and shook her head. “I fear not, Captain. Colonel Forster and Miss Bennet and I are invited to a dinner at the home of Lady Amelia Hartford this evening. However, I am certain we will attend the next assembly at the Old Ship in a few days.”

“I hope you will enjoy your dinner, though I will miss dancing with you, my dear Miss Bennet,” Wickham murmured to Lydia, who was sitting cozily at his side on the couch. He turned his practiced smile on the girl as his eyes flicked down her womanly form. He was, he thought, quite close to convincing the girl to part with her virtue, a most worthwhile, if not particularly difficult, accomplishment. Miss Lydia was a hardened flirt, in sharp contrast to her eldest sisters back in Hertfordshire.

Lydia wrinkled her pert nose and said, “I hope we are not terribly bored, but Harriet insists that we must go. Ah well, I will enjoy



hearing the latest gossip from home from Lizzy.”

“Miss Elizabeth is in Brighton?”  
Wickham inquired in surprise. “I had no idea she intended to join you here!”

“Well, neither did I. She appeared quite suddenly yesterday with a Lady Amelia Hartford, who must be quite wealthy, as she was wearing a very fine gown of blue satin! Lady Amelia is apparently a friend of my aunt and uncle Gardiner, because they are here in Brighton as well, and are staying with the lady.”

“Please give Miss Elizabeth my regards,”  
Wickham requested.

Lydia turned a coquettish pout on the handsome military gentleman. “Well, I am not sure I should, dear Wickham. I do not forget how you used to spend a remarkable amount of time with my dull older sister.”

Once again, Wickham surreptitiously inspected the girl’s comely form. “I assure you, Miss Lydia, that no one could pull me away from your tantalizing presence for long.”

“Gabriel!” Lady Amelia cried out, leaping to her feet at the sight of her second son.

He advanced into his mother’s favorite sitting room and gave her a half embrace with his lone arm. “Good afternoon, Mother. I hope you are well?”

“I am very well indeed, my dear. Thank you for coming so quickly. But come, I must introduce you to my guest. Miss Bennet, my second son, Mr. Gabriel Hartford. Gabriel, Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn in Hertfordshire. She and her aunt and uncle are staying with me along with Mr. Darcy of Pemberley.”

Gabriel turned to the girl who was standing quietly at his mother’s side and bowed, as she in turn curtsied. She was a handsome young woman, Miss Bennet, with a lovely complexion, glossy dark hair, and truly lovely brown eyes. He appreciated that she kept her eyes calmly on his face instead of staring awkwardly at the empty left sleeve of his coat. “Miss Bennet, it is a pleasure to meet you.”

“I am honored to meet you, sir. Lady

Amelia has been telling me of your interest in bees, which I find quite as fascinating as her own passion for butterflies.”

Gabriel considered the gentlewoman curiously; he was well born and, thanks to an inheritance from his mother’s aunt, moderately wealthy, which tended to attract young ladies of little fortune. On the other hand, he had lost his left arm in battle, and that tended to discourage particularly attractive women from pursuing him. He wondered if Miss Bennet was merely flattering him, or whether she was truly interested in insects. If the latter, she was a most remarkable woman.

“I think many people consider our interests to be eccentric rather than remarkable,” he commented.

Elizabeth, at a gesture from Lady Amelia, took a seat near the bow window, out of which sparkled the ocean as far as the eye could see. Gabriel, in turn, lowered himself onto a nearby couch.

“I do not pretend to know much about such things,” the girl admitted with a charming smile, “and I would agree that your passions are unusual, but that does not make

them in any way unacceptable. Indeed, while I do not mean to denigrate your mother's butterflies, I would suggest that bees are far more practical, are they not? Butterflies are beautiful, but bees provide honey, which is one of my favorite treats in the entire world."

His face relaxed and he shot an amused glance at his mother. "There, you see, Mother? Miss Bennet agrees with me!"

Elizabeth cast an uncertain look at her hostess, who chuckled. "Gabriel and I have a long standing disagreement about my butterflies. He contends that my beauties are largely useless since they do not provide anything except their loveliness. I, in turn, point out that bees are prone to stinging on occasion, sometimes without warning."

"They rarely sting if approached properly," the gentleman insisted. "If one is foolish enough to wave one's arms around and shout and scream, then of course the bees will sting. One can hardly blame them for that!"

"All the same, Mr. Hartford, I think that Lady Amelia's neighbors are pleased that she has devoted her attention to butterflies instead of stinging insects. Perhaps beekeeping is better suited for the wide open spaces."

“That is true enough, Miss Bennet. In addition, I am convinced that butterflies do have their role in God’s natural order. I believe...”

The door to the sitting room opened again and he broke off, then rose to his feet at the sight of his old acquaintance, Mr. Darcy, in company with a red coated stranger.

“Darcy,” he said, bowing slightly. “It is good to see you again.”

“Hartford,” Darcy replied, “It is wonderful to see you looking so well. Please, may I introduce my cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam of the Regulars?”

The former and current military men exchanged bows and then Fitzwilliam turned to Elizabeth and bowed to her as well. “Miss Bennet, it is wonderful to see you again.”

She smiled a little tremulously, her eyes shifting from Darcy to the colonel and then back again. “I am most grateful to both you and Mr. Darcy for your willingness to assist us here in Brighton. I am ... overwhelmed to have such good friends.”

Bemused, Gabriel glanced at his mother, who took a step forward and said, “Let us sit down and have tea. It is time for a council of

war.”

## Chapter 7

“Darcy?” Richard inquired, leaning up against the wall of his cousin’s bedroom. Thanks to the exigencies of a military uniform and a talented valet, he had managed to get dressed in time to consult with Darcy before Lady Amelia’s guests were due to arrive.

Darcy, who was staring into a mirror carefully tying his cravat, met his cousin’s gaze in the reflection. “Yes, Richard?”

“Did you ever tell Bingley that the eldest Miss Bennet was genuinely attached to him?”

Darcy winced and turned his attention back to the cloth around his neck, which was behaving in a most recalcitrant fashion. When he had wrestled it into its proper shape and form, he turned to face the colonel and confessed, “I did not. I have not seen Bingley since I learned of my mistaken understanding of Miss Bennet’s feelings toward him, and it is hardly a topic I can openly discuss in a letter. He is visiting friends in the north, though he should return to London shortly.”

The colonel nodded, frowning, and said, “In truth, if he was truly attached to Miss

Bennet, he ought not to have been swayed so easily by your words.”

Darcy shook his head dismally. “It is not as simple as that, Richard. Bingley is younger than I am and has long been in the habit of trusting me to guide him appropriately. In the past, I believe I have successfully steered him well, but in the matter of the eldest Miss Bennet ... well, I confess that now, looking back to last autumn, I realize I encouraged Bingley to leave partially because of my growing attraction for Miss Elizabeth. I was afraid of giving in to my feelings towards her and sought to distance myself physically. And indeed, those few months before we met again in Kent, I only thought of her once or twice a day...”

The colonel eyed his cousin with astonished sympathy. “You thought of Miss Bennet daily? My dear Darcy, you were indeed badly hit by Cupid’s arrow.”

“I still am,” Darcy said, turning back toward the mirror to smooth down his jacket, more out of a need to do something with his restless hands than anything else. “I still love Eliza ... Miss Bennet very much. Perhaps I ought to write Bingley, though; I will consider it.”



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Mrs. Harriet Forster shifted closer to her husband as the carriage rolled smoothly along Marine Parade toward the home of Lady Amelia Hartford. She smiled up at him gratefully when he patted her arm reassuringly and said, "I am certain you will have a pleasant time, my dear."

"I hope so," his lady said with a slight quaver in her voice. "I am nervous."

"Why are you nervous?" Lydia Bennet asked, turning away from the window which faced toward the endless expanse of azure waves rolling in from the horizon. "It will surely be a dinner party like other parties? It may be dull, but there is nothing to be frightened of, surely!"

Harriet nodded weakly and shifted even closer to her husband. As the only child and heiress of a naval captain, she was at ease with military men; however, her father, the son of a wealthy merchant, rarely rubbed elbows with the gentry and never with the nobility. Mrs. Harriet Forster, while well taught at a select seminary, was still not

entirely sure of herself in exalted company and there had been an air of command in the demeanor of Lady Amelia Hartford.

The carriage turned into a drive, and Harriet gazed upon the mansion with wide eyes. It was large and well maintained, and its location on Marine Parade made it a most desirable residence. She took a deep breath and plastered on a smile as her husband handed her, and then Lydia, out onto the paved stone carriage way, whereupon they mounted the steps to the front door, which was opened promptly by a footman dressed in livery.

“Mrs. Forster, Miss Lydia, welcome!” Lady Amelia exclaimed, stepping forward to greet her guests. “Thank you all for coming.”

The threesome stepped into the antechamber beyond the door, and Harriet cast an impressed look around her. The walls were painted a delicate blue which matched the mosaic floor, itself patterned with blue and green and purple.

“Mrs. Forster, will you not introduce me to your husband?” her hostess requested.

“Of course,” Harriet Forster fluttered nervously. “Lady Amelia, my husband,

Colonel Forster. Husband, Lady Amelia Hartford.”

Colonel Forster bowed courteously and said, “Lady Amelia, we are honored to be invited here tonight.”

“Nonsense, Colonel, it is we who are most grateful for your company this pleasant evening! Now come, I believe you know Miss Elizabeth Bennet, but you must meet Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, her uncle and aunt from London. Over here – do come over here, Darcy and Fitzwilliam – Colonel Forster, Mrs. Forster, Mr. Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire...”

“The colonel and I are known to one another,” Darcy explained. “We met when the militia regiment was in Meryton and I was visiting a friend at nearby Netherfield Hall.”

“Oh, how delightful that you are already acquainted!” their hostess exclaimed. “But I do not believe you know Darcy’s cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam of the Regulars, and you certainly have not met my son, Mr. Gabriel Hartford.”

The gentlemen exchanged appropriate bows and the ladies curtsied, though Lydia’s indignant gaze was focused on Darcy. Colonel

Fitzwilliam, noting her hostile expression, immediately stepped forward and said, "Miss Lydia, it is an honor to meet you at last. Your sister Elizabeth spoke much of your family when she was visiting at Kent this spring."

Lydia shook herself a little and turned away from Darcy to peer at Elizabeth, who had deliberately moved away and was now in conversation with Gabriel Hartford. "Did she indeed? I do not remember Elizabeth telling me that she met a military man while she was visiting Charlotte Collins! She spoke much of trees and flowers and hills and the like, and some of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, but I do not remember her speaking of you! Do you have an estate in Kent, Colonel?"

"No, I am the second son of the Earl of Matlock, and Lady Catherine de Bourgh of Rosings is my aunt. I visited my aunt in Darcy's company back at Easter, and I enjoyed the company of your sister during many a dinner at Rosings. Based on her words, you share her liveliness and based on the evidence of my own eyes, her loveliness as well."

Lydia smiled in delight at this open flattery and tilted her head beguilingly, "Do you really think so, Colonel? Most in Meryton consider Elizabeth to be the second most

beautiful Bennet daughter, after my eldest sister Jane, of course.”

“I have not had the honor of meeting Miss Bennet,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said gravely, “but while Miss Elizabeth is a lovely young lady, I find your countenance and demeanor more to my liking; I beg you, however, not to say such a thing to Miss Elizabeth.”

“I promise you I will not!” Lydia exclaimed in delight, her lashes lowered in false modesty. “Oh, I am glad that we came tonight, Colonel! I was afraid it would be quite dull, and I confess I was doubtful when I heard you are Mr. Darcy’s cousin. I dislike him quite tremendously!”

The colonel raised his brow at this defiant statement and glanced at his tall cousin, who had drawn the Forsters apart and was nobly making conversation with them. “Poor Darcy, to incur your displeasure! He is master of a great estate, you know, and inclined to take himself very seriously. His demeanor, too, is rather stiff, but once you get to know him, he is a pleasant enough fellow, I assure you.”

“Perhaps he is pleasant to you, Colonel,”

the girl said angrily, “but he treated a dear friend of mine quite brutally!”

Fitzwilliam leaned a little closer to the girl and pasted a sympathetic look on his face. “I am very sorry to hear that, Miss Lydia. Of whom do you speak?”

“Lieutenant George Wickham,” she flashed back. “Perhaps you do not know of this, but Mr. Darcy denied him a valuable living in Derbyshire. Poor Mr. Wickham was forced to enter the militia instead of enjoying a comfortable life as a clergyman. He is quite poor, and that is Mr. Darcy’s fault.”

The colonel sighed deeply and nodded. “Yes, that entire affair was a great pity, Miss Lydia. Nonetheless, I do not think you can entirely blame my cousin for Mr. Wickham’s current financial woes; he was certainly pleased enough to accept the three thousand pounds in lieu of the living, though perhaps Darcy was wrong to give him the money. Wickham has always been prone to spending money too freely.”

Lydia’s eyes widened and her face froze into a ludicrous expression of bewilderment. “Three thousand pounds? Of what are you speaking?”

“Oh, did Mr. Wickham not tell you?” Fitzwilliam inquired mendaciously. “He decided against taking Holy Orders and spoke of studying law instead. Darcy gave him three thousand pounds for that purpose, in exchange for giving up all rights to the living, but unfortunately it seems that Wickham did not enjoy learning law either. Ah well, I trust that he is relishing his time in the militia; he certainly is blessed with charming society, after all!”

There was a cleft between the girl’s eyes but Lydia managed to produce a coy smile for his benefit. Richard Fitzwilliam, regarding her cynically, decided that Miss Bennet and Darcy were quite right to worry about the girl. Miss Lydia was very handsome indeed, and her sprightly, provocative behavior would attract Wickham like a bee to wildflowers. Moreover, if the reprobate succeeded in seducing Miss Lydia, he would take her, and use her, and enjoy her, and then abandon her without compunction. He hoped that his gentle words in the girl’s ear regarding Wickham would produce a modicum of concern and restraint, but he would not count on it.

“It appears that your sister is quite taken with Colonel Fitzwilliam,” Mr. Hartford mused in a soft tone.

Elizabeth, who had been peeking surreptitiously at the colonel and Lydia, nodded and said quietly, “It was nearly inevitable. The colonel is blessed with happy, cheerful manners, and Lydia has a great love for a man in a red coat. I do hope that Lady Amelia’s more subtle approach will work; I fear that we will wake up one morning and find Lydia gone.”

“I beg you not to concern yourself,” Darcy said quietly, causing Elizabeth to start slightly. She had not noticed that her aunt and uncle were now engaging the Forsters and that Pemberley’s master had come up behind her and Gabriel Hartford. “Wickham is being watched at all times, and he would not be able to run off with anyone without arranging for the hire of a carriage and horses, after all.”

Elizabeth relaxed a little. “That is true enough, Mr. Darcy. I cannot thank you enough for all you are doing.”

“It is my honor to assist in this manner,” the gentleman responded formally, but his



gaze on the woman was so intent, so passionate, that Hartford found himself taking in a sudden breath of understanding. So that was the way the wind blew!

The door to the drawing room opened and the butler entered to announce dinner.

“Shall we enter, Miss Lydia?” the Colonel asked, holding out his arm. “I believe we are seated together at dinner, and I look forward to furthering our acquaintance.”

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“Well, Mrs. Forster, I hope you enjoyed dinner tonight?” her husband asked, patting his wife’s arm and smiling down at her.

“I did,” Harriet responded with relief. “Everyone was most friendly and obliging, and your sister is charming, Lydia. I feel foolish for worrying so much! I trust you enjoyed yourself as well?”

Lydia, who was looking out the window with an oddly blank expression on her face, did not answer immediately, prompting her hostess to call her name two more times before the youngest Bennet looked up in

surprise.

“I apologize, Harriet, I was thinking.”

“About Colonel Fitzwilliam, perhaps?” her friend asked with a roguish twinkle in her eye. “He could hardly take his eyes off you tonight.”

Lydia’s forehead had been wrinkled in thought but she grinned openly at this. “Indeed he could not,” she declared with satisfaction. “I do hope I will get to see the colonel again. Perhaps Lady Amelia will invite us to dinner again!”

“I believe you will see him before then,” Harriet said with a sly smile. “He asked me if we were to attend the assembly at the Inn tomorrow night, and I told him yes, whereupon he assured me that he would also be present!”

Lydia giggled with satisfaction. “Oh, how amazed Mr. Wickham and Captain Denny will be to see that a colonel of the Regulars admires me!”

Harriet shot an anxious look at her husband, but he only patted her arm lovingly again. He knew that many a young thing preferred a man who served in the Regulars, but his little wife had assured him that she far

preferred a militia commander who would not be shipped off to the Continent on a moment's notice.

“I am certain you will have an especially pleasant time at the assembly, Miss Lydia,” he said.

## Chapter 8

The July sun was already bright in the morning sky, but the breeze off the ocean was delightfully cool. Elizabeth Bennet, dressed in a green walking dress with brown jean half boots on her feet, stared out over the endless waves with a mixture of awe and delight. She had read about the ocean, of course, and even seen paintings of the great expanse of water which stretched to the farthest reaches of the earth, but the smell of the salty air, the cries of the wheeling sea birds, the sound of the waves rippling onto the shore, and the sight of the water, sometimes blue, sometimes green, sometimes dark, filled her with an exultant joy.

She looked up at Fitzwilliam Darcy and found herself blushing; the man was not staring at the ocean but at her face, when she knew the ocean ought to be far more interesting.

“It is magnificent, is it not?” she asked rather breathlessly, and felt her blush deepen as he smiled down at her.

“It is magnificent, Miss Bennet,” he agreed, forcing himself to turn his gaze on the

horizon. It was not an easy task; Eliza ... Miss Bennet was so lovely, so vibrant, with a few curls escaping her bonnet in the summer breeze, with the light of wonder in her fine eyes. "I have been to the sea many times before, but it never grows old."

Elizabeth gestured toward the beach. "I am puzzled by the beach, sir. I thought that most beaches are covered with sand, not rocks."

Darcy held out his arm and she took it, and they began walking again parallel to the ocean's edge. Darcy, who relished the feeling of his beloved's hand on his arm, struggled to speak calmly. "You are entirely correct. I have been to Cornwall and Dorset, and the beaches are a vast expanse of sand; here in Brighton, for reasons that I do not understand, we have only pebbles."

"Do listen!" Elizabeth said abruptly, lifting up a finger, and they both lapsed into silence as a large wave broke far up on the beach, only to retreat in a froth of white water. The small rocks shifted and danced in response, making a sound like a hundred castanets.

Elizabeth laughed aloud and Darcy

found himself chuckling with her, pleased at her open delight.

“It as if they are talking,” the lady said, stepping forward again, “though I know that is excessively fanciful. Really, for all that this situation with Lydia is a great worry, I must rejoice that I have seen the ocean at last. It is utterly marvelous.”

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“Darcy is in love with Miss Bennet, is he not?” Gabriel Hartford asked his mother. The twosome were walking arm in arm some thirty yards behind Darcy and his companion, far enough away that they would not be overheard, but close enough to provide the appropriate degree of oversight.

Lady Amelia tightened her grip on her son’s only arm and sighed softly. “Is it so obvious, my dear?”

Gabriel glanced down in some bemusement. “You sound as if it is a bad thing! Miss Bennet seems a thoroughly charming and eligible young lady!”

“Oh she is, she is! It is merely that ...

well, the lady has thus far not been inclined to accept Darcy's suit. It seems a great pity; I believe they are well matched, but of course it must be her decision."

"Are you quite serious, Mother? Darcy is well connected and exceedingly wealthy, and Miss Bennet, as appealing as she is, is but a poor country gentleman's daughter. I find it hard to believe that she would even consider refusing him if he offered for her!"

Lady Amelia trod forward silently for another minute and then, certain that they would not be overheard, said quietly, "You must not share this, my son, but she already refused him once. Yes, she is a remarkable young lady, determined to marry a man she can love and respect instead of focusing entirely on wealth and status. I admire her greatly. I confess that while my primary concern is to save her youngest sister from her own idiocy, I hope this time in Brighton will enable Darcy to woo and win Miss Bennet. But come, enough about our guests. How are you doing, my dear?"

"I am well enough, Mother. Beehaven, while a small estate, suits me very well."

"Beehaven! Such a peculiar name,

Gabriel!”

“It is entirely appropriate, Mama,” Hartford argued, “and far more memorable and apt than its previous name.”

“Gray Cliffs was rather odd given that there are no cliffs, gray or not,” Lady Amelia admitted. “But setting aside the estate, how are you doing? Now I promise I will not mention it again for at least a week, but please tell me – does your arm still pain you?”

The former colonel swallowed a sigh. He knew his mother meant well, but he disliked speaking of the loss of his arm. He was no longer a whole man and while he was thankful he had survived his injury, the reality of his condition rankled. Nonetheless, he knew the situation could be far worse than it was. Most men with such severe injuries to a limb died of infection, and those who survived were often not entirely right in the head afterwards. His mind, while it battled nightmares at times, had recovered and even thrived in the last years.

“I am well enough, Mama,” he said. “I am rarely in pain, and I know some men who have lost an arm feel a strange agony as if the limb is still there. I beg you not to worry



about me.”

“I insist on the right to worry about you if I please, my son,” Lady Amelia insisted with an attempt at lightness. “Do not misunderstand me; I thank the Lord every day that you survived your wound, and I am grateful that you have carved out a good life at Beehaven. But I do worry that you are lonely on that estate all by yourself.”

“I am not alone. I have the servants, and while it may not be a common viewpoint, I consider many of them to be genuine friends. My valet, formerly my batman, saved my life, as you know, by carrying me away from the field of battle after my injury.”

“And I will always be in his debt,” his mother returned immediately, tears springing to her eyes. “But what of a wife, my dear? Do you not wish to marry, to have children?”

Gabriel Hartford clenched his teeth and took a few steps farther down the beach, his eyes fixed forward at Darcy and Elizabeth, who were now some forty yards away. “What woman would wish for a husband like me, Mama? I am a cripple.”

“You are not a cripple. The Prince Regent is a cripple, or at least he is much of

the time with his gout and his corpulence. You are a kind, intelligent man with good looks who happens to be missing an arm. Many a woman would be honored and delighted to marry you.”

“I would suggest, Mother, that a woman who wished to marry me would do so because of my wealth and connections, not for my person, and I cannot bear that. If I ever do marry, I wish my wife to love me, not pity me, and how would I know? Very few women in our circle of life marry for love and respect, and fewer still would care to marry a man no longer whole.”

Lady Amelia said softly, “Such women exist, my dear; after all Miss Bennet refused to marry Darcy, in spite of every financial incentive to do so.”

Her son chuckled and mused, “Perhaps I ought to try to woo Miss Bennet?”

“Oh, Gabriel...”

“I am joking, of course. But come, I believe Miss Bennet has other sisters besides Miss Lydia? She is a sprightly thing, but far too young.”

“She is also a fool, Gabriel. Please do not marry such a one as Miss Lydia.”

“I can safely promise you that I will not.”

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“My dear Lydia, you are utterly radiant tonight,” George Wickham declared, dramatically bowing over the hand of Lydia Bennet. The girl was always handsome, but she was particularly effervescent tonight in a new, pale yellow gown and her hair, piled high on her head, gleamed in the myriad candles of the assembly room of the Castile Inn.

“Thank you,” Lydia returned saucily, though she kept her voice low. “I declare there is nothing more attractive than an officer in a red coat, and you are the most handsome of them all, my dearest Wickham.”

“Thank you! Since you consider me the most handsome, I hope that means that you have set aside the first dance for me tonight?”

“Indeed I have, and I hope that you are appropriately grateful. Colonel Fitzwilliam spoke of attending the assembly tonight and I would quite enjoy dancing my first set with the son of an earl, but naturally I would not

dream of dancing with anyone but my dear Wickham.”

George Wickham had been feeling quite pleased with life, but this casual remark caused him to feel as if a particularly large bucket of ice had suddenly been poured down the back of his uniform.

“Colonel Fitzwilliam?” he asked in astonished dismay.

“Yes! He is the son of the Earl of Matlock, you know, and that tiresome Mr. Darcy’s cousin. But he is not at all like Mr. Darcy, I assure you! In fact, he told me that Mr. Darcy was quite at fault to give you the three thousand pounds for the living. I mean, that sounds like a great deal of money, but naturally it will not do for a man like you, who was raised to be a gentleman!”

Wickham, nearly numb with bewilderment and worry, was relieved when the music started up. He held out his arm to Lydia, and the twosome made their way onto the dance floor. He was an accomplished dancer and mechanically performed the steps with elegance and grace while thinking furiously. Colonel Fitzwilliam loathed him to the depths of his very being, and if it had been

he who had come to Ramsgate and discovered Miss Darcy on the verge of eloping with her father's godson, Wickham had no doubt that the colonel would have beaten him within an inch of his life. It was a small silver lining, really, that Darcy was too much a gentleman to come to fisticuffs with his childhood playmate.

"Mr. Wickham, whatever is the matter?" Lydia demanded, breaking into his thoughts. "You have not said a word in more than ten minutes!"

"My apologies," he responded, pulling himself out of his reverie as the twosome twirled gracefully around one another. "I am merely astonished at the news that Colonel Fitzwilliam is in Brighton. Where did you meet him?"

"Oh, he is staying with Lady Amelia Hartford, and I met him at our dinner party yesterday," the girl explained cheerfully. "Mr. Darcy is there as well, and Lizzy of course, and my aunt and uncle Gardiner. I thought the party was going to be a great bore, but it was actually enjoyable. Colonel Fitzwilliam is quite the gentleman, you know, and he has such interesting stories about his service on the Continent. Did you know he was actually

in Madrid last autumn? I would not care to travel to foreign lands myself, but the colonel's descriptions of the great buildings and foreign people were most interesting!"

Wickham forced himself to smile mechanically at Lydia's words and said, in a tone which was sharper than usual, "I daresay it is difficult for a man like myself to compete against a world traveler like the colonel."

"Oh!" Lydia said in surprised indignation. "Of course there is no one who has my heart like you, dear Wickham! I find Colonel Fitzwilliam interesting, that is all! It would hardly be courteous to refuse to speak and dance with him. Indeed, I thought you would be pleased; I suppose he is not very rich, but he is the son of an earl and might be able to help us after we marry!"

"Of course I do not mind," Wickham answered, forcing himself to speak gently, "though I doubt he will be able to help us, my dear. For that matter, I am not certain you should count on seeing him again. I find it unlikely that someone as starched up as Colonel Fitzwilliam would attend this assembly; indeed, it is unlikely you will cross paths again."

“I am afraid you are wrong, my dearest love!” Lydia responded with a coy smile. “He is right over there, in the corner near the refreshments, do you not see? He said he would come and no doubt is counting the minutes before he can dance with me!”

Wickham stumbled slightly, missing a step in the dance, and craned his head frantically. Lydia was quite right; Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam of the Regulars was standing next to a wall near the refreshments’ table, and his dark stare was grimly focused on Wickham himself.

George Wickham, godson of George Darcy, reprobate, scoundrel, and seducer, swallowed hard and said to Lydia, “My darling, you are quite correct that he is here! I am grateful, for I am not able to stay long tonight to dance, as I have some work that must be done in an hour. I am thankful that Colonel Fitzwilliam is here along with Captain Denny and several other of your favorites; you will not have to sit out, I am certain, since you are the most beautiful lady in the room!”

Lydia, who had started to pout at the beginning of his statement, was smiling brightly by the end. “I will miss you, but yes, I will not be bored, I assure you. Are you not

looking forward to when we marry? Then we will never be parted! But please tell me, when can I see you again? With Lizzy and my aunt and uncle in town, it is more difficult for me to get away.”

“I intend to be at Donaldson’s library tomorrow at eleven in the morning, my dear. Might you be able to meet me there?”

“I would not miss it for the world,” Lydia said merrily as the music ended. Wickham led her off the dance floor, only to freeze in dismay when Colonel Fitzwilliam stepped in his path.

His breath hitched briefly but he managed to bow with mechanical civility and say, “Colonel Fitzwilliam, how pleasant to see you.”

“It is very pleasant to see you too,” the colonel replied. Wickham eyed him uneasily. The tone was pleasant enough, but there was a wolfish expression in those dark brown eyes.

“Miss Lydia,” Fitzwilliam said, turning to bow more deeply to the girl, “as you see, I have come to request my dance. I hope you are available? If not, I will stand in the corner and wait forlornly until you can bless me with the joy of your company.”



Lydia laughed saucily at this and curtsied. "I do have this dance free, Colonel Fitzwilliam, thank you! Mr. Wickham, until later."

"Good evening, Miss Lydia," Wickham responded, bowing again, and watched as Darcy's cousin wafted the girl away. He cast a nervous glance around him, fearful that Darcy might leap out of the woodwork and accost him, and hastened to the main door and out into the cooler night air. He needed to do some hard thinking.

## Chapter 9

“My dear Miss Lydia, you are an excellent dancer! I have rarely enjoyed a set so much,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said, looking down into the girl’s sparkling eyes.

“Why thank you, Colonel!” Lydia answered happily. “I simply adore dancing, especially with a fine military man like yourself.”

“I am honored that you think so highly of a man in a red coat,” the earl’s son responded, managing a slight bow in the midst of their movement in the dance. “Many a young lady is more interested in a rich, landed gentleman like my cousin Darcy than a soldier like myself.”

“Oh, I am not like that at all!” Lydia exclaimed. “I cannot understand any girl preferring Mr. Darcy to you, Colonel Fitzwilliam. He is so stern and distant, whereas you are a cheerful man with such wonderful manners, and your father is an earl!”

“Thank you,” the colonel responded with a warm smile.

“Is Mr. Darcy here tonight? And my sister Elizabeth?”

“No, I fear my cousin is rarely interested in public assemblies, and your sister is spending this evening with Lady Amelia and her son. I find I cannot repine, as this allows me to spend additional time with you.”

Lydia simpered at these words while Fitzwilliam looked down on her with something akin to astonishment. He was being absurd; no son of an earl would drool so idiotically over an impoverished daughter of a country gentleman. It was clear that the girl did not understand traditional society, nor did she understand true breeding. He felt a brief stab of compunction at his methods, which quickly melted away. He was overtly flattering the young woman for her own benefit, and the benefit of her sisters and family.

For that matter, his own aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh of Rosings, was used to her underlings and dependents figuratively groveling in her presence. If a lady of some fifty odd years could be foolish enough to believe the honeyed words of her retainers, why should Miss Lydia wonder at his own charming speeches?

He cleared his throat and said, "I did wish to inquire whether you believe you will be free to attend a party in the near future, Miss Lydia, at the Marine Pavilion."

Lydia was so startled that she almost missed her step. "The Marine Pavilion, sir?" she demanded in awe. "Where the Prince Regent stays when he is in Brighton?"

"Yes, precisely. Prinny is back in Brighton as of three days ago and he always likes meeting new people, especially lovely young ladies. I do not yet know the date of the party, of course, but I suspect we will be invited in the next week."

"Are you ... are you truly serious?" the girl asked, suddenly looking much younger. "Might I truly meet the Prince Regent himself?"

"Of course I am serious! Lady Amelia Hartford, with whom I am staying, is a long standing resident of Brighton and thus has interacted with his Royal Highness many times. She is always invited to the Pavilion at least twice a summer, and the Regent just arrived from London in the last few weeks. Your sister will come, as will Darcy and I, and Lady Amelia and her son and, we hope, you

and the Forsters, if you think your hosts would be interested.”

“Of course they will be interested, Colonel! I can hardly believe ... oh, how Kitty will cry when she hears that I met the Prince Regent himself. Oh, sir, thank you very much!”

“I am honored to be of service in any way.”

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George Wickham took a last swig of beer from his cup, lowered it onto the scarred wooden table, and strode briskly up to the proprietor of *The Golden Daffodil*, one of the many drinking establishment which catered to the military men in Brighton.

“Yes?” the man inquired absently, rapidly pouring alcohol into glasses to assuage the endless thirst of the military men chatting and drinking and even quarreling in the increasingly loud room.

“I wish to pay off my tab!” Wickham informed the man over the din. “My name is Lieutenant George Wickham!”

The man's blue eyes brightened and, after handing off the drinks to one of the weary girls bustling about, picked up a grubby book from behind the counter and began thumbing through it.

"George Wickham?" he repeated a minute later, though now his tone was slightly disappointed.

"Yes."

"You are already paid up, this morning indeed."

"Oh, perhaps it was my friend Scott? Tall, dark and quite handsome, wearing gentleman's clothing?"

The red headed owner of *The Golden Daffodil* frowned and then shook his head. "No, 'twas a thin, short, blond gentleman, though not a gentleman, if you take my meaning. Dressed like a laborer, he was."

"Ah, perhaps Scott sent an underling! Well, I am glad the tab is paid off. I do not care to be in debt," Wickham lied calmly. "Good evening to you, sir."

"Good evening," his host answered courteously, already beginning to pour more cups of spirits for the benefit of his clamoring patrons.

Wickham strode out of the smoky room and into the humid evening air, cursing softly under his breath. This was the fourth tavern he had visited this evening, and at three of the four, the same thin man had bought up his tab. There was only one explanation – someone was intending to have him arrested for indebtedness.

As for who, that too was obvious enough. It could not be a coincidence that Fitzwilliam Darcy and Richard Fitzwilliam were in Brighton, nor could it be mere chance that Miss Elizabeth Bennet was with them.

For a brief moment, Wickham allowed his mind to dwell on the image of the lovely and lively Miss Elizabeth. She had been quite a favorite of his back in Meryton, and had accepted without hesitation his tale of woe regarding his cruel treatment at the hands of Fitzwilliam Darcy.

Unfortunately, Miss Elizabeth had spent two months in Kent in the spring, and had met both Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam when they visited their mutual aunt, the imperious Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Elizabeth had been quite altered in her attitude toward Wickham when she returned from the Hunsford Parsonage where she had been staying with

her friend, Mrs. Charlotte Collins. When Wickham had met Miss Elizabeth after her return, he was no longer the beneficiary of the lady's admiring smiles. Instead, he had experienced satirical looks, and uncomfortable questions, and odd statements concerning Darcy and Fitzwilliam. Clearly, one of the men had told the girl something about Wickham's dealings with the Darcy family in general and the stolen living in particular, and while Lydia Bennet had accepted that three thousand pounds was not nearly enough to pay for such a valuable living, Elizabeth no doubt felt differently about the matter.

Wickham's steps slowed as he approached another tavern, *The Goose Girl*. On one hand, he had a strong desire to get extremely drunk to escape his fears. On the other hand, he had better stay sober and plan to ... to what? Run away? He had been intending to flee soon, of course, given his steadily mounting debts not only with the tradesmen and tavern keepers, but with his fellow officers. Given that Fitzwilliam and Darcy were plotting against him, he had best leave very quickly indeed.

As to where he would go, he did not know. His time in the militia had not been



monetarily remunerative, but he had benefited from the status of a red coat, which allowed him to borrow freely from local merchants. Once he fled to London, he could no longer safely wear his military regimentals, as he would, technically, be deserting.

Ah well, he could always lodge at least briefly with Mrs. Younge, who had been his accomplice when he had attempted to elope with Georgiana Darcy. The woman now ran a boarding house, and no doubt she could find some corner in which he could stay temporarily. It was not ideal, but he would determine something afterwards. He had not starved yet thanks to his good looks, charm, breeding, and intelligence.

Of course, it would be more pleasurable to flee with a companion, and he had one in mind, Miss Lydia Bennet, who was besotted with him and was both well-endowed and handsome, though regrettably poor.

Wait...

Lydia Bennet was a foolish flirt with none of the sense and gentility of her elder sister, but she and Elizabeth were both Bennets. Something must have brought the elder Miss Bennet to Brighton, and given

Lydia's character, it was almost certain that the foolish girl had boasted of her love for Wickham, in a letter perhaps, which in turn caused Elizabeth to rush hot foot to Brighton to save her young sister from what was, without a doubt, a most disadvantageous relationship for the Bennet family.

But why were Darcy and Fitzwilliam involved? Why would Darcy bestir himself on behalf of the Bennets, whom he despised both for their ties to trade and for the behavior of Mrs. Bennet and her younger two daughters, all of whom were vulgar and ill-bred?

It was not as if Darcy could have any interest in Miss Elizabeth! All of Meryton had overheard his insult of her at an assembly before Wickham had joined his regiment. Darcy had said loudly that Miss Elizabeth was not 'handsome enough to dance with'; it had been a convenient insult for Wickham as it had turned the local gentry against Darcy. Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth were much admired in Meryton society. No, Darcy took himself and his place in society very seriously and was too much of a cold fish to be genuinely stirred by passion for any woman, much less the unconventional, if lovely, Miss Elizabeth.

So why was Darcy here and not at Pemberley, overseeing his exceedingly vast and wealthy estate? It could only be due to the influence of Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam. He and Darcy were more brothers than cousins, and the colonel had been at Rosings with Darcy while Elizabeth was in residence at the nearby parsonage. The colonel had no doubt fallen in love with the girl and did not want to see her suffer through Miss Lydia's indecorous behavior.

Not that it was likely the colonel was actually considering marrying Miss Elizabeth. Or was he? As a second son, the man must desire a wealthy bride. On the other hand, the current Viscount Brantworth, eldest son and heir of the Earl of Matlock, had sired only one daughter with his sickly, aristocratic wife, and the girl was ten years old. There was a strong likelihood that eventually Colonel Fitzwilliam would accede to the earldom after his brother died. Given that, perhaps Richard Fitzwilliam was actually considering marrying Miss Elizabeth Bennet, who was healthy and vibrant, handsome and amusing, bright and quick.

For a moment, Wickham considered the possibility of trying to charm the second Miss

Bennet again, then reluctantly discarded the idea. The young lady was too intelligent to fall for his practiced speeches and loving gazes again.

Miss Lydia, however, was ripe for plucking. She was already in love with him, already longed to marry him. If Wickham ran off with her, he could blackmail Darcy or the Matlocks into paying him to marry the girl. If they refused, he could and would abandon her, which would ruin the entire Bennet family. That, while not monetarily remunerative, would bring him great pleasure given their circuitous connection to Darcy.

Wickham looked up from his reverie to discover that his wayward steps had brought him to the door of his barracks. The night was still young, but he would go to bed absurdly early as tomorrow would be a busy day. He needed to entice Miss Lydia to agree to an elopement, arrange for a carriage, and prepare to shake the dust of this seaside town off his well-polished boots.

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Richard Fitzwilliam trod up the steps of

the Hartford mansion and nodded to the footman who opened the door for him.

As was the way of such men, Lady Amelia's butler abruptly materialized and announced, "Sir, Mr. Darcy, Mr. Hartford, and Miss Elizabeth are in the south sitting room."

Richard nodded and made his way to the room, which, with its windows open to the night breezes, was delightfully cool.

"I am quite fascinated at the thought of raising bees in such a remarkable and far more sensible way," Darcy was saying as he entered. "It is such an advantage..."

He trailed away at the sight of his cousin and rose to his feet, along with Elizabeth, who looked both tired and anxious.

"Colonel Fitzwilliam! How was your evening?" she inquired with her hands clasped tightly in front of her.

Fitzwilliam looked at his watch and realized that the grandfather clock in the hall would soon strike the midnight hour. "Given how late it is, Miss Elizabeth, may I give a report of the evening without adhering to the conventions regarding the behavior of your sister? It would save time, and I am sure you are longing to retire."

“Please do, sir,” Elizabeth said. “As much as it pains me to hear of Lydia’s poor behavior, there is nothing to be gained by burying my head in the sand.”

“Well, as to that, your sister behaved relatively well, though I have no doubt that was partially due to my presence along with the fact that Wickham left after the first dance.”

“Did he indeed?” asked Darcy sardonically.

“He did,” his cousin said, and added with marked satisfaction. “I believe that he did not much appreciate my presence at the assembly. In any case, Miss Lydia and I danced and I suggested that we would meet the Prince Regent in the next weeks, which she thought entirely delightful. I flattered her delicately, and suggested all sort of exciting outings in the next few days. I do hope she is sufficiently intrigued that she will not elope with Wickham, though I am no expert on your sister.”

Elizabeth blew out a slow breath and said, “I have great hopes you are correct, Colonel. On the one hand, she has longed to be the first one married, and she trusts

Wickham to behave honorably toward her. But to meet the Regent, to hobnob with the cream of Brighton society? She has always desired to be important in our social circle back in Meryton, and such a meeting would be quite a feather in her cap.”

“If she does meet the Prince, one of us must watch over her carefully,” Gabriel Hartford declared.

Elizabeth looked startled. “The Prince would not truly pay attention to a young girl like Lydia, would he?”

The three gentlemen exchanged glances and Darcy said carefully, “The Regent is regrettably rather loose in his behavior toward the opposite sex, though he will hold the line if one of us three stay close to Miss Lydia and you.”

“Me!?”

“My dear Miss Elizabeth, you are exactly the sort of woman to appeal to His Highness,” the colonel asserted. “But as Darcy says, you need not to be concerned. We can manage him.”

Elizabeth shook her head worriedly and said, “I do hope we are not doing more harm than good by introducing the Regent, however

peripherally, into our little family problem.”

“You need not to be concerned, I assure you,” the earl’s son said. “Prinny is a dissolute man in many ways, but he would never run off with a girl like Lydia, nor will he promise marriage to a mere gentleman’s daughter, aside of course from the fact that he is married already.”

“Married twice, in truth,” Hartford pointed out coldly.

Elizabeth sighed and then straightened with determination. “I trust you all, and again, I am most thankful for your assistance.”

“It is our honor,” Darcy said formally, but his eyes were alight with warmth and yes, love, causing Elizabeth to blush.

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A few minutes later, Elizabeth peered into the mirror in her bedroom as she carefully removed the pins from her hair. A maid had assisted her in removing her dress, and she was now alone and pleasantly comfortable in her favorite dressing gown. She was in reasonably good looks, she



thought, but her eyes looked weary after several disturbed nights, and she did not expect to enjoy completely restful sleep for some time.

In the midst of her concerns for Lydia, she had successfully managed to repress her confused feelings towards Mr. Darcy, but with Lydia on the road to safety, with Wickham on the verge of arrest for indebtedness, she realized she absolutely must consider her feelings about the master of Pemberley.

Over the last months, her views of that gentleman had shifted like the pebbles on the beaches of Brighton under the influence of a great wave. She had settled – nay, embraced – a strident dislike of Mr. Darcy within minutes of their first encounter, when he had insulted her beauty at an assembly. Then she had foolishly listened to George Wickham's slander against the Darcy family without seeking the actual truth. By the time she met Darcy in Kent, she was completely confident in her judgment of both men when in fact it was Darcy who was the true gentleman, and Wickham the reprobate. How ashamed she had been when she realized that Wickham's accusations were prevarications and that she had accepted them without question!

A verse from the eighteenth chapter of the Proverbs sprang to her mind, one that she had read long ago and, it seems, remembered but not applied to her own life.

*He that is first in his own  
cause seemeth just; but his neighbour cometh and  
searcheth him.*

It was dangerous to assume that one had garnered all necessary information from one party, when it was all too common for men and women to repress facts which justified their own behavior in a quarrel.

She had been so righteously outraged when Wickham told of the 'stolen living' when in fact Mr. Darcy had provided three thousand pounds in payment so that Wickham would give up all rights to the living, and at Wickham's request, no less! It was a truly enormous sum for one man, and Elizabeth knew that the lieutenant had run through it all within a few years.

Elizabeth reached out for a brush and sighed, noting the dark circles under her eyes. She had not been sleeping well of late, and it was not merely Lydia, but her confusion about Darcy.

For she was confident Darcy still loved

her; she, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, who had passionately rejected his offer back in the parsonage at Hunsford, who had flung accusations of unbecoming behavior in his face. Elizabeth Bennet, daughter of a lazy father and foolish mother, whose youngest sister was willing to run off with an impecunious, dishonorable man.

Instead of staying away from her, Darcy had accompanied Elizabeth and her family to Brighton, introduced them to Lady Amelia, and had worked with Colonel Fitzwilliam to protect Lydia. She could never repay him for his goodness.

Except he did not want to be repaid with gratitude, she knew that. He wished to marry her and ... and she believed that she might wish the same in return. He was an intelligent, honorable, and kind man, a good brother, and diligent master to all those who depended on Pemberley for their well-being. The more time she spent with him, the more aware she was of his good character.

She could only hope that she could come to a decision should he offer again before she had to leave Brighton.

## Chapter 10

“Mr. Wickham!” Lydia enthused, beaming at the young man as he approached Mrs. Forster and her younger guest. “How wonderful to see you this lovely morning!”

Wickham responded with a gentle smile and courtly bow, which provoked soft sighs of admiration from the two ladies. Mrs. Forster, dressed in an expensive, if not especially attractive, yellow silk walking dress cried out, “Oh Mr. Wickham, I am so sorry you were forced to leave the assembly early yesterday evening. Lydia and I had a most delightful time. I danced with an old acquaintance of yours, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam. He is such a gentleman, and with such easy manners given that he is the son of an earl!”

Wickham managed another smile through gritted teeth and said, “I am pleased you both had an excellent time. Regrettably, I had some duties to attend to which forced me to leave early. But tell me, what do you plan to borrow from the library today? *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, perhaps?”

“Oh, I wish we could!” Mrs. Forster exclaimed. “I long to read it, but every time I

come here, every copy has been snatched up by another patron. Divine Byron! How I long to read his work!"

"Are you quite certain there is not a copy available?" Wickham asked in well simulated surprise. "I thought I heard from Captain Denny that the library recently received several more quartos of the book. Perhaps you should inquire of the librarian?"

Mrs. Forster nodded eagerly and exclaimed, "Thank you, sir! I will!"

She started off immediately toward the other end of the library, her face set with hopeful determination, and Wickham turned immediately to Lydia, who was gazing up at him adoringly.

"My dear," he murmured softly as he thrust his chest out into his most attractive pose, "I fear I dissembled a little in sending Mrs. Forster away. I cannot bear to be parted from you any longer and am ready to journey to Gretna Greene. Will you come with me soon, my darling, to join our hearts forever?"

Lydia's eyes glowed with ecstasy, "Oh yes, my love. That is what I wish above all things! When shall we depart?"

"Might you be willing to meet me

tomorrow morning at nine at the south entrance of the Promenade Grove? I..." He trailed off as Lydia's cheerful expression shifted into a frown. "Whatever is wrong, my dear?"

"We cannot leave Brighton tomorrow. I am to meet the Prince Regent shortly. We can elope after that."

George Wickham blinked in astonishment. "The Prince ... my dear Lydia, whatever are you talking about? You are hardly going to meet with the Regent, even if he is in Brighton at the moment, and I am not certain that he is."

"But I am, I assure you!" Lydia insisted. "His Royal Highness arrived only a few days ago, and Colonel Fitzwilliam knows him, and he says Lady Amelia and her party, and the Forsters and I will all be invited to the Marine Pavilion to meet the Regent. Oh, Wickham, I will beg the Colonel to include you in the invitation. Will it not be marvelous to meet the man who will be king?"

Wickham opened his mouth in protest and then closed it with a snap. There was no use arguing with the silly girl. The colonel, obviously bent on pulling her away from

Wickham's snares, had found a most powerful lure. Lydia would never pass up the chance to meet with the Prince Regent as it would elevate her standing in the little community of Meryton. Of course, if Wickham ruined the girl, she would likely never see Meryton again, but he could hardly tell her that.

"Of course, I understand entirely," he breathed, smiling fondly down upon her pretty face. "But I do miss you, my love, and with all your social activities, and my duties with the militia, I feel as if we are merely ships passing in the night. Would you be willing to meet me tomorrow at the Promenade Grove so that we can steal a few minutes together? It will be quiet there, and peaceful, and we can make our plans for next week, after we have met the Regent."

"I will be there!" Lydia assured him ecstatically.

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"Here is a letter for you, Jane, from Elizabeth and one from Lydia to you, Kitty. I do not understand why our daughters never write me, their mother!" Mrs. Bennet

complained, handing over the missives and sinking into her favorite puce chair in the drawing room.

“I suspect it is because you do not write them in return, Mrs. Bennet,” Mr. Bennet responded drily, proceeding to rise to his feet and wander toward the door. He had been enjoying a short tete-a-tete with Jane who, since Elizabeth was with her Gardiner relations, was the only other sensible member of his family currently in the house. Now that his wife and Kitty had arrived, he would retire to his library to read in peace.

“Go ahead and read your letters, girls,” Mrs. Bennet suggested. “I suppose Lydia is having a lovely time with the officers, and Elizabeth a wonderful time with rocks and trees!”

Jane happily removed a hairpin from the knot holding up her golden tresses, and carefully used it to break the wax on the letter. She sank down onto a chair next to the window, through which the early afternoon sun shone brightly, permitting her to read the words with ease.

*Dearest Jane,*



*I know this will be quite a shock to you, my dear, and I do hope you will forgive me for unintentionally distressing you. Aunt and Uncle Gardiner and I are not traveling north but are, in fact, residing in Brighton in the mansion of Lady Amelia Hartford, a friend of the Darcy family.*

*I showed Uncle Gardiner Lydia's letter, you see, and he too was disturbed by its contents. He informed me, upon our departure from Longbourn, that he thought it best to go to Brighton to check up on our youngest sister. Believe me, Jane, I did not know what he intended and thus when we departed, I truly thought we were going north.*

*I am most thankful to Uncle Gardiner for his resolve to investigate the situation. We stopped in London on our way to Brighton and our uncle consulted with Mr. Darcy, which, while I found it embarrassing, was without a doubt the right decision. Mr. Darcy, who is very familiar with Mr. Wickham's vile proclivities, agreed that Lydia was in great danger from the miscreant. Mr. Darcy arranged for us to stay in Brighton with Lady Amelia, who is an old family friend of the Darcys. Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, Darcy's cousin whom I met at Rosings last spring, has also joined us.*

*We have seen Lydia and she is very much*

*herself, except more so given that her only chaperone is Mrs. Harriet Forster, who is nearly as flighty as she is. However, I am confident that with the oversight and assistance of our new friends, she will be kept safe from Wickham.*

*I hesitated to write of this matter because I know it places a burden on you. If you feel you must, you may tell Mother and Father, but my preference is that you keep silent about our decision to go to Brighton. Father will no doubt feel we are overreacting, and Mother will be indignant that we are attempting to spoil Lydia's fun.*

*I trust your delicate sense of propriety will guide you as to whether to tell our parents or not.*

*I confess that in the midst of my worries about our youngest sister, I am enjoying myself a great deal. The sea is marvelous, Lady Amelia a charming and fascinating hostess, and Mr. Darcy has been most kind and honorable in his dealings. I wish you were here; that would make my joy complete.*

*With much love,*

*Your dearest Lizzy*

Jane realized her hands were trembling slightly. The letter was indeed a most

profound shock. Mr. Bennet had specifically told Lizzy not to worry about Lydia, and instead of journeying north to enjoy herself, she had embrangled the Gardiners in her concerns and traveled south to Brighton!

She read the letter again, and a third time, and then lifted her face to stare at her mother, who was now on her feet fussing over a set of ceramic ornaments on the mantelpiece. Mrs. Bennet would undoubtedly be outraged at what she would term Elizabeth's interference.

Elizabeth's preference was that Jane keep the letter private, and Jane would submit to that desire. It would be better if neither of her parents learned of...

"It is not fair!" Kitty squealed suddenly, causing her mother and Jane to jerk in shock. "Why is Lizzy permitted to go to Brighton when I am not? Oh, Mama, it is not fair!!!"

Mrs. Bennet's face was a study in amazement. "What are you speaking of, Kitty? Lizzy is traveling north with the Gardiners."

"No, she is not!" shrieked her fourth daughter, shaking the letter in her hand angrily. "Lydia says that Lizzy is in Brighton

with the Gardiners and is staying in a beautiful house with a Lady Amelia Hartford, and Mr. Darcy is there, and his cousin, who is the son of an earl, and she is going to join them at elegant parties, and oh, I am two years older than Lydia. It is not right!"

Mrs. Bennet hurried forward to snatch the letter from her daughter's hand.

"Nonsense, Kitty, you must have misread it. Elizabeth cannot be in Brighton. She and your aunt and uncle are going north!"

"What is the meaning of this row?" Mr. Bennet snapped, erupting into the room with his face must unusually flushed. "I am accustomed to noise and nonsense in every other room of the house, but I expect to be able to read in my library in peace! It sounds as if someone is being slowly murdered in here!"

"She is there!" Mrs. Bennet exclaimed, her white lace cap bobbing with incredulity. "You are quite right, Kitty, that is exactly what Lydia writes. Lizzy is in Brighton, Husband, along with the Gardiners! What can she be doing there?"

Mr. Bennet's face, already red, turned nearly purplish as he took the offending letter,

lifted up his monocle, and hastily read the words scrawled on it.

“Jane,” he demanded with far more ferocity than he had ever turned on his gentle eldest daughter. “Do you know anything about this outrage?”

Jane quailed before the anger in her usually calm sire’s face. “Yes, sir,” she confessed, her voice shaking a little. “I just learned of it, Father, from this letter that arrived from Elizabeth.”

Mr. Bennet snatched the letter from her hand and, turning so the light fell full on it, quickly read his favorite daughter’s letter once and then again. When he finished, his eyes were narrowed with anger, and Mrs. Bennet exclaimed in confusion, “What is it, Mr. Bennet! Why is Lizzy in Brighton?”

“She is there, Mrs. Bennet, because she chose to disobey my orders and involve the Gardiners in her idiotic fears for Lydia.”

“What are you talking about? What fears?”

“She found a letter that Lydia wrote Kitty, in which Lydia was in raptures about her love for Lieutenant Wickham. Lizzy absurdly took her silly sister’s words to heart,

fearful that Wickham and Lydia would run away together to Gretna Greene. Such nonsense! I told her not to worry about it and to enjoy her journey north with the Gardiners; instead, she somehow managed to infect them with her own ridiculous terrors, and they accompanied her to Brighton to check on Lydia, and dragooned *Mr. Darcy*, of all people...”

“But would it not be good if Lydia married Mr. Wickham?” Kitty asked timidly, causing her father to stop mid roar and focus on his fourth daughter.

“What? Of course not! The man is an impoverished militia lieutenant, and entirely incapable of supporting Lydia in the manner to which she is accustomed. But that is not the point, Kitty. Wickham is not fool enough to marry Lydia; he wishes to marry for money, after all.”

“But he loves Lydia!” Kitty blurted out. “If a man loves a woman, surely wealth should not matter? Indeed, Father, they are going to marry – Lydia’s last letter reached me only two days ago, which is why I was surprised she wrote again so quickly. Mr. Wickham has pledged his love to her and has promised Lydia they will embark to Gretna Greene as

soon as Mr. Wickham can collect some money from fellow soldiers; he lent his friends too much, you see. He is such a generous man...”

“Wickham agreed to elope?” Jane cried out. “Father, that is outrageous...”

Mr. Bennet was trembling now with a mixture of fury and fear. “Fetch me Lydia’s previous letter, Kitty. Now!”

Kitty, sobbing, ran out of the room, leaving Jane profoundly shaken,

“Oh Mr. Bennet!” his wife quavered. “It cannot be true, can it? My dear Lydia would not be so foolish as to go to Gretna Greene! If she is to be married, it must be from Longbourn, from her own house! Why would she run away to Scotland with the lieutenant?”

“She would run away because I sired an imbecile, Mrs. Bennet,” her husband snapped. “As for Wickham, I am quite certain he has no intention of marrying Lydia; he is a penniless wastrel in search of a rich wife, not a sixteen year old with no charms except her person and her virtue...”

Jane cringed in horror at her father’s intemperate speech, just as Kitty, still crying, reentered the room with a paper in her hand.

Mr. Bennet snatched it from her hand, read it twice, and then looked up with a stricken expression on his face. "If Lydia is to be trusted, Wickham has agreed to elope with her. Dear God."

"He cannot possibly ruin her, Father!" Jane exclaimed. "He could not be so cruel. It would not merely be Lydia destroyed, but our whole family's honor as well!"

"Jane," her father said impatiently, "I know that you wish to believe the best of everyone, but there are in fact cruel men in the world, and deceitful men, and lazy men. I include myself in the latter group; I should have listened to Lizzy's concerns, but I was too indolent to bother myself with Lydia's activities in Brighton, especially after Elizabeth warned me some weeks ago that letting her foolish sister stay in a camp full of soldiers was unwise. I was too proud to admit I was wrong and can only hope that she and the Gardiners and yes, Mr. Darcy, will protect Lydia from herself."

"You must go to Brighton, Mr. Bennet!" shrieked Mrs. Bennet. "You cannot stay here and let my darling Lydia be ruined by an evil man."



“Have no fears, Mrs. Bennet, I will leave for Brighton within the hour and bring Lydia back home as quickly as I can,” her husband assured her. “I am merely fearful that when I arrive, she will have already flown in the company of a consummate rascal.”

“At least you did write to Colonel Forster!” Jane said in a consoling voice. “He will be watching over Lydia with special care, I have no doubt.”

Her father’s face grew even grimmer, if possible, and he shook his head dolefully. “I did not write Forster, Jane. I dislike writing letters, and I was entirely certain that there was no cause for concern, so I kept putting it off.”

“Oh Father...”

Mr. Bennet sighed deeply and shook his head. “I fear I am greatly at fault in this matter but I cannot turn back time. Jane, can you please speak to Hill and tell him to meet me in my room? I must pack quickly.”

“Kitty can speak to Hill. I am coming with you to Brighton, Father,” Jane announced, forcing herself to speak firmly.

The Bennet patriarch frowned and then nodded. “Very well. You will be of great

assistance, Jane, as you can provide a gentle buffer between my second and fifth daughters, and my own irascible self. Kitty, speak to Hill.”

“Yes, sir,” Kitty breathed, and scurried away, leaving Jane and Mr. Bennet to walk swiftly upstairs and pack their trunks with the help of the servants.

Mrs. Bennet, who had been intermittently sobbing and complaining, found herself without an audience. When the housekeeper, Mrs. Hill, entered the room a few minutes later, the matriarch of the family made her way to her bedroom and collapsed into bed, quite exhausted from all the upset. Within a few minutes, she was snoring.

# Chapter 11

## *London*

“Thank you, Briggs,” Charles Bingley told his butler, who had just placed a tray with a glass and a bottle of brandy on his desk. “You may go. I do not wish to be disturbed.”

“Yes, sir,” Briggs replied and sailed regally out the door, leaving Bingley to pour himself a glass of spirits and sink into the seat behind his desk.

Bingley took a sip and leaned back with a soft groan. Only last night, he had returned to London with his sisters and brother by marriage. Mr. and Miss Bingley and the Hursts had been visiting an old friend of Bingley’s from his Eton days, a Mr. Alexander Ludlow, who owned a house and lands in Staffordshire. The three weeks in the company of his friend had been pleasant enough; Ludlow and his wife were charming hosts, and there had been fishing and riding and other activities on the small but thriving estate of Greenhill.

Bingley *had* enjoyed himself, but as he gazed blankly at the papers on his desk, including a tall pile of mail, he felt a stab of melancholy. The Ludlows, who had been married for two years and were now expecting their first child, were a well matched couple and took pleasure in one another's company. Bingley was grimly aware that this was hardly a common experience among the gentry, who often elevated wealth and societal standing over compatibility between spouses.

The Prince Regent was, of course, perhaps the most dramatic example of such doubtful priorities in all of England. After entering into an illegal marriage with the Roman Catholic Maria Fitzherbert in 1785, the Prince's mounting debts had forced him to marry instead his cousin, Princess Caroline of Brunswick, in 1795, in exchange for having his monumental accounts paid for by the Crown. The Prince Regent and his wife despised one another from the beginning, and after producing one child, the heiress to the throne, Princess Charlotte, they had separated permanently. Now the Prince wended his way from London to his Brighton house and back again, engaging in adulterous affairs with various women, spending money like water,

while also struggling with crippling pain from gout.

Perhaps, mused Bingley, the Prince was happy enough with his life; he certainly had money and all the feminine companionship he wished. But he, Charles Bingley, had no desire to live such a dissipated lifestyle, nor had he any intention of leaping headlong into the debauchery typical of British aristocrats. He wanted to marry a woman whom he loved and admired, sire children, and live amicably with his wife until they were both old and gray. He could not imagine anything better.

For at least the thousandth time in the last eight months, a vision formed in his mind's eye, that of the beautiful face of Miss Jane Bennet of Longbourn, Hertfordshire. He had loved her greatly, adored her even, and had planned to marry her, only to discover that she did not truly care for him but would accept his offer for practical reasons. He could not blame her for being willing to accept a marriage proposal without true attachment; Longbourn was entailed to a distant male heir, and the five Bennet daughters would be nearly penniless once Mr. Bennet died. However he was not willing to settle for a mere marriage of convenience. Or was he? Perhaps his sister

Caroline was right, perhaps he ought not to hope for mutual love between himself and his prospective wife. One thing he did know; he could not bear to marry a woman whom he admired and treasured if the lady did not return at least some of his feelings. It would be exquisitely painful to live with, to share a bed and children with, a woman who smiled on the outside while remaining entirely indifferent to him on the inside.

Bingley emerged from his reverie when his eye recognized familiar handwriting on a letter on one side of his desk. He reached forward curiously and snatched it from the pile; it was from his closest friend, Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire.

Darcy was an excellent companion, if at times a rather discouraging one – it was he who had informed Bingley that Miss Bennet was not truly fond of him – and Bingley valued his expertise as a landowner and his advice as a man of the world. He quickly reached for his letter opener, carefully slit the missive open, and began to read.

*Brighton*

*July 26th, 1812*

Bingley,

*I am currently residing with Lady Amelia Hartford in Brighton, and thus unfortunately have missed your return to London. I trust that you enjoyed your sojourn north with your friends. I am certainly enjoying the company here in Brighton; Miss Elizabeth Bennet and her charming relations, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, are houseguests here, along with my cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam.*

*I have no doubt you remember that last December, we departed Netherfield Park for London for reasons which, at the time, I felt were cogent. I have since come to understand that I was mistaken in my advice to you. I regret my error, most sincerely.*

*Lady Amelia assures me that if you would care to come visit us in Brighton, you are most welcome; regrettably, the house is already rather full, so your sisters and brother by marriage cannot be accommodated, nor, with the Brighton Season in full swing, are there any houses for rent in the area.*

*My best wishes on your health and happiness.*

*Sincerely, Fitzwilliam Darcy*

Charles Bingley felt the world tilt before his eyes and he reached out to steady himself on his desk. Darcy ... what had he said? Surely he ... what?

He read it again, and then a third time, and then poured himself another stiff drink of brandy, which he threw down his throat before leaning limply back on his chair.

Darcy said he had been wrong, and while his friend's words were couched carefully, it was obvious that his error was regarding Miss Bennet's true feelings toward him. She had cared for him!

Bingley had known it, he truly had. He had seen the light in her celestially blue eyes, and the smile on her lips. She had gazed upon him far more fondly than on other men. Jane Bennet loved him!

A great smile split his face wide open and he laughed aloud and rose to his feet, then began striding vigorously up and down his office. He felt suddenly as if he could float, maybe even fly! He would ask her to marry him, and they would be happy together.

He found himself staring out the window into the back garden, breathing heavily, his mind whirling. He would return to



Hertfordshire within the day, and woo Miss Bennet, and...

Wait, what if the lady was not at her ancestral home? Miss Elizabeth was in Brighton in the home of Lady Amelia Hartford, after all. Perhaps Miss Bennet was also visiting elsewhere in the realm.

For that matter, why was Miss Elizabeth in Brighton, and with Darcy as a fellow houseguest of all things? It was truly peculiar, especially since her tradesmen relations were also staying with Lady Amelia, whoever she might be.

Brighton was not a great distance from London. He could ride there in less than a day and consult with both Darcy and Miss Elizabeth, who could tell him where Miss Bennet was currently residing. Given the complex situation, that was the best course, especially given that his sisters would howl and fuss if he decided to return to Netherfield.

His sisters.

What was he to do with them? Caroline would no doubt relish traveling to Brighton given that Darcy was in residence there; his younger sister had been attempting to win Pemberley's master for several years now, not

that there was any hope of that. Darcy, while a close friend to Bingley, would hardly marry a merchant's daughter. Darcy was also more or less engaged to his cousin, Miss Anne de Bourgh, the heiress of the great estate of Rosings, and if something prevented Darcy from marrying Miss de Bourgh, he would have no difficulty finding a wealthy, well connected, noble woman to be his bride.

He would not tell them anything, he decided. None of his relations awoke early. He would order his valet to pack a bag and sneak away in the early morning by horse, and he would arrive at Brighton by mid-afternoon. It was an excellent plan.

He took a few joyful steps toward the door and then frowned as he observed the pile of correspondence on his desk. He had been gone from London for more than three weeks, and he really must consult with his man of business on a few matters. Furthermore, Caroline had been spending rather freely and he needed to speak to his man of business to provide funds for payment of her bills. As much as he wished to rush off immediately to Brighton, he had a few vital tasks to complete here in Town. He had waited many months to propose to Miss Bennet; he could wait a few

more days, albeit reluctantly.

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“Oh, Mr. Gardiner, do look at those dolls!” Mrs. Gardiner exclaimed, staring through the windows of one of the shops on North Street, an exceedingly busy road within easy walking distance of the Steyne. “Would not Priscilla and Phoebe each adore one as a gift?”

“Perhaps, my dear,” Mr. Gardiner returned with good humor, “if they did not promptly lose them amongst all their other toys.”

“Now, Husband, you will give Mr. Darcy quite the wrong idea of us,” Mrs. Gardiner returned indignantly. “Indeed, we do not spoil our children so very much, sir.”

“It is obvious that you love your children greatly, Mrs. Gardiner,” Darcy responded with genuine admiration. “I can only applaud you for that.”

“Thank you. Mr. Darcy, I am quite certain that Elizabeth would like to wander the Promenade and at this hour, it must be

quite well populated. Would you be willing to escort her there?”

“It would be my pleasure,” Darcy responded gratefully, looking down on Elizabeth who, while blushing slightly, was clearly pleased. “Shall we meet you back here in an hour, or would you prefer that we make our own way back to Lady Amelia’s home?”

After a little further discussion, Darcy and Gardiner agreed that they would each escort his individual lady home. The master of Pemberley, his heart full, guided Elizabeth down the street toward the lavish Promenade Grove where numerous formal beds of flowers were laid out between grassy paths. For a full ten minutes, the couple wandered without speech; Elizabeth was delighted at the myriad conclaves of roses and irises and cornflowers, all well maintained but designed in such a way as to augment the natural beauty of the grove.

Darcy, in turn, while he enjoyed the flowers, admired the face of his love far more. He had long admired Elizabeth Bennet’s vigor and enthusiasm for walking and her appreciation for nature. He saw, in her sparkling eyes and glowing countenance, her enthusiasm for God’s creation, and, not for the

first time, imagined her wandering Pemberley's gardens at his side.

She looked up and smiled at him, and his heart leaped in his chest. She was so beautiful, so alive, so vibrant...

Elizabeth, in turn, found herself blushing under the intent stare of her companion. If she had ever doubted his continued regard for her, she was now entirely reassured that his adoration toward her had, if anything, only grown through the turmoil and challenges of the last months.

"Are the gardens at Pemberley as charming as the Promenade Grove?" she asked, struggling to retain some semblance of equanimity.

"My mother...", Darcy replied, and found his speech trailing away. Elizabeth's softly pink cheeks and her smiling, rosy lips were so enchanting that he entirely forgot what he was going to say.

Elizabeth waited a few seconds and then gently prompted, "Your mother?"

"My mother," he repeated, forcing himself to turn his gaze on a flaming bed of orange and yellow calendulas. "My mother loved flowers very much, much as you do,

Miss Bennet. The gardens at Pemberley have not been altered much since her passing, but they are lovingly tended by our horticulturalists.”

“It must be beautiful.”

He turned back to her, determined to behave like a gentleman and not a drooling fool. “They are,” he agreed, and then added daringly, “I hope that you will see them one day yourself.”

“Mr. Darcy,” she said suddenly, “I am certain you are quite weary with being thanked for all that you have done for our family...”

“Indeed I am,” Darcy interrupted with false indignation.

“I do wish to say that I ... I greatly regret my cruel, and entirely erroneous, words toward you back at the parsonage in Hunsford. When I think of my blind prejudice, my intemperate speech, I can only be ashamed of myself.”

“Oh please, do not apologize!” the gentleman cried out, though softly given that they were only some twenty-five yards from a party of ladies wandering along an adjacent path. “It is I who am to blame! I was proud

and rude and acted above my company while dwelling at Netherfield Park with Bingley, and greatly at fault for not dealing with Wickham during my sojourn near Meryton. Your reproofs were exactly what I needed to take a clear-eyed look at my pride and discourteous behavior. There are few women who have ever corrected me, and though it may seem odd, I find it to be one of your most wonderful qualities.”

Elizabeth smiled rather shakily. “Mr. Darcy, I believe we both have reason to regret aspects of our past interactions. I can only be thankful for this opportunity to heal the wounds of the past, even if our purpose here in Brighton is a serious one.”

Darcy stared at her in wonder and another offer hovered on the tip of his tongue. He repressed it. It was too soon to be entirely confident of the lady’s feelings, and with Miss Lydia Bennet’s situation still uncertain, it was not the time for a proposal.

“I am most thankful as well,” he agreed.

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“I must say, Mr. Hartford, that Brighton

is a far more pleasant town than I had anticipated,” Edward Gardiner commented. The ladies had withdrawn after dinner, leaving the men to their port, and Darcy could not remember when he had felt so content. Elizabeth Bennet’s words had provoked a sense of hope, and the companions around the table – the merchant Mr. Gardiner, the one-armed Mr. Hartford, his cousin Richard, and he himself, were, in spite of their differences in wealth and status, a remarkably congenial group.

“I believe that the Prince Regent’s enthusiasm for Brighton has given it a somewhat false reputation,” Hartford responded. “It is true the town has grown and altered due to his patronage, but at its heart, Brighton is still but a lovely little town by the sea. When I returned from Corunna, gravely wounded, the sounds of the waves, the warm sunshine and the sea air, were, I believe, as important a factor in my recovery as my doctors.”

“Is the Promenade Grove of recent origin, Mr. Hartford?” Darcy inquired.

“No, it opened more than fifteen years ago. Without doubt, the Prince’s love of Brighton has encouraged the development of a



number of other enjoyable diversions.”

Miss Bennet and I walked the Grove this morning,” Darcy mused, a contented smile on his face. “The gardens are both peaceful and remarkable.”

Mr. Gardiner shot an amused glance at the tall gentleman from Derbyshire. “I confess that I am surprised that you were able to notice the flowers given your company, sir.”

The tallest gentleman in the room flushed and glanced nervously at Hartford, provoking his host to chuckle openly.

“You need not feel any chagrin,” Gabriel Hartford declared. “Your feelings for the lady were obvious to me within a few minutes of our mutual acquaintance. I wish you the very best. Miss Elizabeth Bennet is a truly remarkable woman.”

Darcy, an intensely private man, was uncomfortable at this common knowledge of his preference for Elizabeth, but he responded with honest gratitude. “I appreciate your good wishes, sir. I can only hope that with time, I will win the lady.”

“I believe you and my second eldest niece are very well matched,” Mr. Gardiner said, abandoning his teasing, “and I am

grateful for this opportunity for you and Elizabeth to spend time in company together. My brother by marriage, Mr. Bennet, may well condemn me for allowing such a friendship to develop, but I confess that does not concern me as much as the happiness of my dear niece.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam, who had just taken an appreciative sip of his excellent brandy, looked up in surprise. “You speak as if Mr. Bennet would be displeased at a union between my cousin and Miss Bennet, but that seems quite impossible! Darcy may be an austere, gloomy sort of man, but he is quite one of the wealthiest gentleman in the kingdom and very well connected.”

Gardiner, who was playing with his glass, grimaced and said, “My brother Bennet is an odd sort of individual. All of us in this room are aware of his dreadful lack of oversight regarding Miss Lydia. He is an intelligent but indolent man, and disinclined to bestir himself from his library. I have no doubt that his inability to sire an heir has made him even more languorous with regards to the estate and his family, though that is no excuse. However, while he is a less than exemplary father, he does love his daughters

in his own way, and especially Elizabeth, who inherited both his intelligence and his wit.”

“How many sisters does Miss Bennet have?” Mr. Hartford asked curiously.

“Elizabeth is the second out of five Bennet daughters, whose ages are three and twenty to sixteen,” Gardiner explained. “All have more or less inherited their mother’s beauty, but thanks to the entail on Longbourn, and a lack of foresight on the part of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, none will have a substantial dowry. You are aware that Elizabeth’s dowry...”

Darcy raised an irritable hand, silencing him. “That is of no concern to me, Mr. Gardiner, I assure you. Elizabeth is a treasure by herself.”

“Am I correct that Mr. William Collins is the heir to Longbourn?” Colonel Fitzwilliam inquired.

“That is correct, and while I have never met the man, I understand from Elizabeth that he can not be trusted to be generous to the Bennet ladies if the worst should come to pass.”

“Richard and I are both acquainted with the man since he serves as parson under the

autocratic guidance of our aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh,” Darcy said. “I quite agree that for all that he is a clergyman, I do not trust him to be particularly generous.”

“There is another point to consider,” Colonel Fitzwilliam commented, “If Darcy and Miss Bennet make a match of it, your family will be linked by marriage to the Matlocks and Darcys and de Bourghs; those connections will give the other Bennet daughters more hope of good marriages in the future. Given how lovely and charming Miss Elizabeth is, I daresay men will be beating down the doors of Longbourn, though I realize that you are pursuing the most delightful Bennet daughter of them all.”

Darcy smiled, a little sadly, and said, “Miss Elizabeth is a rare jewel indeed, but many a man would be privileged to marry the eldest Miss Bennet. She is incredibly handsome, along with being kind, gentle, and gracious.”

“Is she as beautiful as her next sister?” Richard asked curiously.

“Most consider her more so,” Edward Gardiner asserted, leaning forward. “Jane is one of the most appealing woman in all of

England, and Elizabeth's closest friend and confidant. For all that, they have dissimilar characters; Elizabeth is quicksilver and fire, and Jane is placid, serene, and wishes to believe the best of everyone. She is a very comfortable companion and will make some lucky gentleman a fine wife indeed."

Darcy's mind turned to Bingley; had his friend received his letter regarding Jane Bennet's true feelings toward him? And if so, was Bingley still interested in wedding the lovely eldest daughter of Longbourn?

The door to the dining room opened, distracting him, and Lady Amelia's butler, with a bow, led in a short, blond gentleman dressed in the dark garb of a laborer.

Once the door had closed behind the butler, Mr. Smythe bowed courteously to the assembled men and said calmly, "Sirs, I have news of Mr. Wickham."

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Lydia Bennet, dressed in her favorite green walking dress, skipped rapidly down the street toward the Promenade Grove, taking the time to wave at several militia officers who

were up and about early in the morning. The sun was shining, but the wind was pleasantly cool. The air was redolent with the scent of flowers, and she felt herself entirely happy and, indeed, self-satisfied. It had been no difficult feat to slip away from the Forster residence this morning, avoiding the maids already toiling away in the kitchen and basement, but it still made her feel grown up and mature to be sashaying down the streets of a lovely town, within the very sight of the Prince Regent's pavilion, to meet with her love, the handsome, popular, divine Mr. George Wickham, whom every woman on the face of the earth would be privileged to win as a husband. How she loved him, and how she looked forward to being his wife, to having her sisters gaze upon her with envy and admiration. No longer would she be young Miss Lydia, but a married woman and quite the most important daughter in the house!

Her heart leapt at the sight of Mr. Wickham's tall figure standing near the entrance to the Grove. For at least the hundredth time, her eyes raked down his handsome form with enthusiasm, and she quickened her step as he turned to look upon her. For a brief moment, she thought she

caught a look of exasperation but concluded, a moment later, that she must be mistaken. At any rate, he was smiling now, and his eyes were tender as he gently remonstrated, "You are late, my love."

"Oh, I overslept a little," Lydia responded cheerfully, "and then I could not find my reticule for a few minutes. I am absolutely determined to buy some sweets from the shop on the way home. I adore licorice lozenges above all things, and so does Mrs. Forster!"

"They are quite delicious," Wickham agreed, putting out his arm and beginning to stroll away from the entrance.

"They are so tasty! But where are we going? I thought we were going to walk through the flower gardens together; I do love the smell of the roses!"

"In a few minutes we will, I promise," the lieutenant assured her smoothly. "I have a surprise for you, however, which will not wait."

"A surprise!" his companion squealed. "What is it?"

"Well, it would not be a surprise if I told you now, would it?" Wickham said with a

fond smile as he gestured with his free hand. "It is within that carriage there."

Lydia quickened her steps and within a minute, she arrived at the side of the chaise which was drawn up to the curb of a side street with a dark clad man at the reins of two job horses. Wickham, with a loving smile, opened the door to the carriage and touched her gently on the back. "Do step in, my darling, and see your surprise."

Lydia leaped into the carriage eagerly and looked around, first with anticipation, and then with confusion. The interior compartment contained two facing seats but it was entirely empty of boxes or people or any sort of gift. Moreover, the seats were tattered and the air pungent with the smell of old sweat and a rather noxious perfume, which displeased her sensitive nose.

A moment later, she turned in confusion as Wickham leaped in behind her, shut the door with a slam, and called out loudly, "Drive on!"

The fifth Bennet daughter, wide eyed, lurched and fell into a seat as the horses were set in motion. She stared in bewildered wonder at her companion. What was



happening?

## Chapter 12

“What is happening?” Lydia exclaimed, shifting to sit up more comfortably. “Where are we going?”

“As I said, my dear Lydia, it is a surprise,” Wickham replied with a return of his charming smile.

“But, my love, I cannot go anywhere! Mrs. Forster will be up soon; indeed, I was only intending to stay for a few minutes at the Grove before returning to the house! No, Wickham, it is very sweet of you to surprise me, but now is not the time. Tell the coachman to stop!”

She waited expectantly, but the lieutenant merely leaned back against the squabs of his seat, his eyes narrowed, his lips set in a determined line.

“Wickham! Stop the carriage!” she repeated, an undefinable alarm rising in her breast at both her companion’s expression and refusal to act.

“I am afraid that is not possible, my dear. My situation is such that I must leave Brighton immediately, and you are coming

with me. You do wish to marry me, do you not, dear Lydia?”

“Of course,” she began impetuously, and then stopped in bewilderment. “Leave, now? Are you mad? I do not have my valise and clothes and ... and I want to meet the Regent!”

“The Regent,” Wickham replied with a snarl. “Do you not see, you little fool? Colonel Fitzwilliam was merely flattering you. Do you really believe the Regent would care about a girl of no importance at all from the rural wilds of Hertfordshire?”

Lydia’s eyes flared wide with anger and incredulity. “What are you speaking of? You said ... how dare you? Stop the carriage!”

“No,” Wickham responded, smiling unpleasantly at his captive. “No, my dear Lydia, you are coming with me and given that we will be alone in a carriage for several hours, you might as well calm yourself and enjoy the ride. Furthermore, I intend to take you as my own when we reach the boarding house where we will be staying in London. Your reputation will be entirely ruined unless you marry me. So you see, you have no choice in the matter.”

She gazed at him, her pupils dilating in

horror. This was her love, her dear Wickham. How could he be so cruel? Ruined? *Taken?*

A moment later, she was on her feet and began pounding on the roof of the carriage. “Stop!” she shrieked. “Stop!”

With a curse, Wickham lurched forward and struck her hard on the face, causing her to fall backward with a scream of pain and terror.

“Be quiet, you fool!” he snarled, his teeth bared in fury. “You wanted a romance, well, now you will pay the price for...”

There was an inarticulate cry from outside the carriage and a moment later, the vehicle pulled to a sudden stop. Lydia, now genuinely terrified, dove for the door. Wickham swore again and shoved her roughly back on the seat as he yelled, “Drive on, drive on!”

The carriage door jerked open and Wickham, who had been partially leaning on it, half fell onto the pavement. A moment later, he was pulled harshly to his feet in time for one strong fist to connect firmly with his upper jaw. He yelled in anguish as he fell to the hard ground on his backside. A moment later, powerful hands pulled him back to his

feet. Wickham, cringing in confusion and fright, stared incredulously at his assailant.

“Colonel Fitzwilliam!” he gasped, glancing around wildly. The carriage had driven only a few hundred yards from its starting place, and was now on a side street with a few pleasant houses built along it. He paled even more at the sight of Darcy standing nearby; his godfather’s son was clenching his fists, his eyes molten with outrage.

“Yes, Wickham,” the colonel responded in disgust. “I did not think you were either brave enough, or fool enough, to abduct a lady.”

“It takes little courage to take advantage of a young woman,” Darcy declared, his voice dripping with contempt, as he reached a hand into the carriage where Lydia still cowered in distress. “Please come out, Miss Lydia. You are safe.”

Lydia gulped convulsively and took the proffered hand, allowing Darcy to help her alight. Her left hand was covering her aching eye, and she stared in wonder at her rescuers. “How did you come to be here, Mr. Darcy? Colonel Fitzwilliam?”

“We thought Wickham was planning to

run off with you, Miss Lydia, and took steps to make sure that he would not succeed,” Darcy explained. “Did he hurt you?”

Lydia’s brown eyes were swimming in tears, and her left cheek was harshly marked in red. “He struck me! I told him to stop the carriage and he hit me!”

“That is why I called for Mr. Hartford to stop the carriage,” the short, blond Mr. Smythe explained, stepping forward. “I know you instructed me to wait until we reached Colonel Forster’s house, but when I heard Wickham strike the lady, I thought it best to stop immediately.”

“I am thankful you did,” Darcy assured his employee, just as another carriage drew up behind the hired coach. The new horses had barely halted before the door flew open and Elizabeth Bennet jumped out and ran over to the group. “What happened? Lydia, are you well?”

“Wickham hit me!” Lydia exclaimed with a mixture of anger and bewilderment. “He tried to abduct me and when I called to the coachman to stop the carriage, he hit me!”

Elizabeth turned on her former favorite and stared at him with outraged disgust. “You

are a loathsome toad. I am pleased that I will never have to look upon your foul face again.”

Wickham, whose head was spinning from the repeated shocks of the last few minutes, managed a smug grimace. “Your sister is ruined if I do not marry her, Miss Elizabeth, so I assure you that you *will* see my handsome countenance again.”

“Marry you?” Lydia spat, taking an angry step forward. “I would rather marry a snake!”

“And nothing happened to Miss Lydia,” Mr. Hartford asserted, climbing down carefully from the seat behind the horses. “I was driving the horses and listening carefully, and Mr. Smythe was on the box seat in the back. Miss Lydia was not compromised in any way, I assure you.”

“Miss Bennet,” Darcy said, turning an adoring gaze on his beloved, “would you and Mr. Hartford be kind enough to escort Miss Lydia back to Lady Amelia’s home? Colonel Fitzwilliam, Mr. Smythe and I will take Wickham to Colonel Forster, and from there he will be remanded into the custody of either the military or civilian authorities.”

Elizabeth nodded and placed a

comforting arm around her sister. “Come, my dear sister. Let us go to Hartford House, and we will put a cool cloth on your face.”

Lydia nodded meekly, took a step toward the waiting carriage, and then turned to glower at Wickham. “What will happen to him?”

“For attempting to abduct a gentlewoman? He will die,” the colonel said coolly, tightening his grip on his captive’s arm.

Wickham, who had been scowling angrily, jerked in astonishment. “Do not be absurd! She agreed to run away with me. I did not abduct her!”

“I told you I did not want to leave with you. I told you to stop the carriage and you refused. You hit me! I hate you!” Lydia yelled.

“And I despise you,” Wickham snapped angrily. “You are a whining child, and all I ever wanted from you was to take...”

Gabriel Hartford might have only one arm, but he was an active man with fine musculature. Before Wickham could finish his vile pronouncement, Gabriel swung his only fist hard and impacted Wickham’s head, causing the man to collapse to the ground. A



moment later, he offered his arm to Lydia and said gently, "Shall we go, Miss Lydia?"

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"Hello, little one," Lady Amelia Hartford murmured, peering fondly at the butterfly which had come to rest on a nearby aster plant. "You are a beautiful lady, are you not?"

The butterfly in question, known as *Venessa cardui* in Latin, was a charming example of its kind, with orange and yellow markings on the top of the wings, and a motley but attractive pattern of white, black, tan, and orange on the underside.

Amelia leaned against the back of her simple wooden chair and took a deep breath, attempting to calm her agitated spirits. The news that Miss Lydia had been briefly abducted by Wickham was most distressing, and while Amelia was thankful the girl had been rescued, it was still very dreadful. George Wickham was a truly repulsive man!

The door to the conservatory opened and Elizabeth entered the glass enclosed room, her eyes weary and her hair disheveled. Lady Amelia jumped to her feet in a way that quite

belied her age and hurried toward her young guest. “How is your sister, Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth managed a tired smile and said, “I have no doubt that Lydia will be well enough in time, though she is quite shaken at the moment. To be entirely truthful, I found myself so rattled by the situation that my aunt Gardiner suggested I leave Lydia to her ministrations. My aunt is a far more soothing presence than I am.”

Her hostess gestured toward two chairs and suggested, “Please, will you not sit down, Miss Bennet? You look exhausted. I will order some tea, and then, if you do not mind, I would like to know what exactly happened this morning; I know that Wickham attempted to abduct your sister, but not the details. Of course, if you wish to keep it private, I...”

“No,” Elizabeth said hastily, sitting down and leaning back with a sigh of relief. “If you had not opened your home to us, I have no doubt Lydia would be in the clutches of that reprehensible rogue. I trust you completely.”

Amelia Hartford nodded and hurried to the door, calling for a maid to bring tea, and then returned to sit down beside her young friend. “My dear Miss Bennet, you look

shaken. Please, let us wait until tea arrives while you compose yourself.”

Elizabeth nodded gratefully and sat in contented silence for a few minutes. The conservatory was a marvelous and unusual place, filled as it was with flowers and butterflies. Some of the flowers and plants were, she knew, conventionally considered weeds, but her hostess had explained that butterflies depended on wild plants for sustenance and as a locale for laying their eggs. It was marvelously relaxing to observe butterflies flit and float about the room and alight on various blooms.

Five minutes later, a smiling maid entered with a tea tray, which she placed on a small, graceful stand near the two ladies. Amelia nodded her dismissal and carefully poured tea for her young friend.

Elizabeth accepted her cup with a smile of thanks and began to speak. “Last night Mr. Smythe, who is in the employ of Mr. Darcy and my uncle Gardiner, discovered that Mr. Wickham had hired a job carriage for this morning. Smythe assumed, correctly, that Wickham was planning to run off with my foolish young sister, and told the gentlemen of the man’s prospective flight.”

She took a welcome sip of tea and continued, "The Gardiners and I were informed of the danger, and with the agreement of the gentlemen, Mr. Smythe approached the hired coachman and offered him a substantial sum to let another man take his place. Your son was kind enough to drive the carriage this morning to the rendezvous point, and Mr. Smythe was waiting nearby; he leaped on the box seat as soon as my sister and Mr. Wickham entered the carriage. Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam were on horseback nearby and intended to follow the carriage to Colonel Forster's home, where Wickham would be arrested for desertion and attempting to run off with the young guest of the Forsters. We are hoping, you see, to prevent any kind of scandal by having Wickham arrested for a military crime as opposed to a civil one."

"Excellent," the lady said approvingly. "I assume that my son and Mr. Smythe can testify that nothing improper happened while the couple was alone within the coach?"

"Precisely. The plan was that the Gardiners and I would follow the gentlemen on horseback in another hired carriage and join the original party at the Forsters.

However, Lydia, while she crept away to meet Wickham at the Promenade Grove, did not willingly elope with him. The blackguard tricked her into entering the carriage and then ordered the coachman to drive away. She resisted and called for the driver to stop, and Wickham struck her hard across the face.”

Lady Amelia gasped, lifting her hand to her chest in horror. “My dear Miss Bennet! Is she badly hurt?”

“No, she will be well, though her face is already bruising and she will have a black eye. Mr. Smythe overheard the scuffle and ordered the carriage to stop immediately, and Colonel Fitzwilliam took the opportunity to leap off his horse, pull Wickham from the carriage, and clout him in jaw. After my aunt and uncle and I arrived, your son helped us gather up Lydia, and we returned here, away from prying eyes. Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam escorted their prisoner to Colonel Forster.”

Lady Amelia Hartford blew out a slow breath and shook her head dismally. “I knew Wickham was an odious individual, but I had no idea that he would stoop to abduction.”

“Colonel Fitzwilliam says that he will die

for his crimes,” Elizabeth murmured.

“I daresay he will,” Lady Amelia agreed coolly.

## Chapter 13

Colonel Forster ran his left hand down his face and sighed deeply, wondering how such a pleasant day could turn sour so quickly. He had woken up at his usual hour, only to be surprised and delighted to discover that his young wife had crept into his bed during the night. After a pleasant time together, he and Harriet emerged from their bedchamber and were just breaking their fast when a maid announced the arrival of Mr. Darcy of Pemberley and his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam of the Regulars, along with Lieutenant George Wickham and a Mr. Smythe.

That was peculiar enough, but when the two gentlemen and one commoner entered his office a few minutes later, they were hauling with them George Wickham, who was sporting a black eye and a swollen chin. The resulting conversation was horrifying in the extreme, and so incredible as to be ridiculous.

“Really, Gentlemen,” Forster said feebly, “I ... must confess that this entire affair seems quite absurd. Miss Bennet generally sleeps late, and as far as I know, she is still abed in

her room.”

“By all means, send a maid to see if young Miss Lydia is within the house,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said sarcastically. “Naturally, my cousin and I are in the habit of making up lies about our fellow men, for amusement, perhaps.”

Forster flushed angrily at this and glanced at Wickham, whose battered face showed both defiance and fear. “I am aware, Colonel Fitzwilliam, that Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham have a difficult history and that your cousin has treated the lieutenant rather harshly. You will forgive me if I require some proof of what seems a most outlandish tale.”

“No doubt you refer to the so-called stolen church living?” Fitzwilliam riposted drily. “It may be of interest to you that Darcy paid Wickham three thousand pounds to give up all rights to the living, or perhaps you were aware of this?”

Forster turned an astounded stare on Wickham, who lowered his eyes. “I confess I did not know that detail,” Forster admitted, “and it alters Wickham’s story about Mr. Darcy significantly. Nonetheless, there is ... well, clearly the sensible step is to check on



the whereabouts of Miss Bennet.”

“By all means, please determine to your satisfaction that Miss Lydia is not within the house,” Darcy suggested patiently, glancing warningly at his cousin.

A few minutes later, after the entire house had been searched from top to bottom, Forster, now alarmed, turned a glowering glare on his lieutenant. “Now Wickham, what is the meaning of all this? Is it true that you abducted Miss Lydia Bennet?”

Wickham, who had been thinking rapidly, shook his head quickly. “No, sir, I did not. It is true that I am in love with Miss Lydia, and we were running away to Scotland together, but I would never force a woman...”

He was interrupted by Forster, whose eyes were now wide in shock and horror. “You attempted to run off with my guest, the daughter of a gentleman, and a girl of only sixteen years age? Are you mad, man? How dare you?”

“He dares because he is a vile miscreant,” Darcy insisted. “I assure you, Colonel, that he encouraged Miss Lydia to creep out this morning in order to meet him at the Promenade Grove, whereupon he tricked

her into entering a carriage. If we had not been warned of his plan, he would be halfway to London by now, and Miss Lydia and her entire family ruined.”

Forster took a furious step toward his former lieutenant, who cringed under the man’s fierce glare. The militia commander breathed heavily for a full minute and then turned to his fellow colonel.

“Sir, I apologize for my earlier statement. Where is Miss Lydia? Is she safe?”

“She is staying with her sister and relations at the home of Lady Amelia Hartford,” Fitzwilliam explained, relaxed now that the man was willing to believe the truth. “Wickham struck her hard on the face, but she is otherwise unharmed.”

Forster glared at Wickham in disgust. “He struck her?”

“Yes,” Darcy contended icily. “Miss Lydia proved an unwilling victim and cried out to the coachman to stop, whereupon the villain slammed his fist into her face.”

Forster grew pale with fury and, after cogitating for a minute, bit out, “That is entirely outrageous, gentlemen, and I am prepared to advocate for a very severe

punishment.”

“That is entirely unfair,” Wickham exclaimed angrily. “Miss Bennet agreed to leave with me, and today she was merely being coy. I was consumed by love and passion and yes, I agreed to elope with her, but I did not abduct her!”

“I believe that all of this should be thrashed out in a more formal setting,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said as Darcy, obviously enraged, clenched his fists. “We do request the investigation be treated as a military matter as the Bennets might suffer if any details concerning Miss Lydia’s abduction escaped into Brighton society.”

“It shall be done,” Forster promised grimly. “I know I am very much at fault for permitting such a thing to happen to my guest, and intend to prosecute this matter to the fullest extent in my power.”

“Thank you, sir,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said, his tone genial now that he had what he wanted.

As for Fitzwilliam Darcy, he stared at George Wickham with a mixture of sorrow and determination. It was a tragedy that a man of such ability, looks, and charm would

die before his thirtieth birthday, but his attempt to kidnap Lydia Bennet showed that the man was truly beyond reclamation.

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The south facing sitting room was one of Elizabeth's favorite at Hartford House. The windows, currently opened to allow the breeze to circulate, faced out to the ocean, and when Elizabeth listened carefully, she could hear the sound of the waves advancing up, and then receding from, the pebbly beach. The room itself was decorated with butterfly images, reflecting Lady Amelia's passion for the winged beauties. Generally, Elizabeth found herself at peace in this room, but not today, not when her foolish sister had been saved from peril and ruin only a few hours previously.

"How is Lydia, Aunt Gardiner?" Elizabeth asked, looking up as her aunt stepped in to join Mr. Gardiner, Elizabeth, Lady Amelia, and Mr. Hartford.

Madeline Gardiner nodded reassuringly and announced to them all, "She is asleep, and I left Lady Amelia's maid watching over her.

She will be well, though she is profoundly shaken by the events of the day.”

“She should be,” Elizabeth declared with some frustration. “If it were not for the intervention of everyone here, Lydia would be ruined, though I suspect my sister has no understanding of how much danger she was in today.”

Mrs. Gardiner accepted a cup of tea from Lady Amelia with a smile of gratitude and sat down across from her favorite niece. “In truth, I have not seen Lydia so distressed since she was a child of five and her favorite dog died. It is one thing to make assignments with handsome officers; it is quite another to be abducted and attacked by the man she believed she loved. No, my dear, as terrible as this morning’s experience was, it seems to have penetrated Lydia’s foolish confidence that she is the mistress of her own fate.”

“I profoundly hope that you are correct, Aunt. Lydia...”

She trailed off as the door opened again to reveal Lady Amelia’s butler. This was not in itself any great surprise, but the presence of two familiar faces behind him caused her to leap to her feet in amazement.

“Father? Jane! What are you doing here?” she exclaimed.

“Mr. Bennet, Miss Bennet,” the butler said, his expressionless tone in sharp contrast to Elizabeth’s emotional cry. Elizabeth flushed a little and cast a discomfited look at her hostess, who moved forward fluidly and smiled on the newcomers.

“Mr. Bennet, Miss Bennet, I am Lady Amelia Hartford. Welcome to my home.”

“Thank you,” the Bennet patriarch returned conventionally. He looked ruffled and a trifle unkempt after hours on the road, but he managed a courteous bow and Jane curtsied.

“I am certain you wish to speak to Miss Elizabeth and the Gardiners,” Lady Amelia continued graciously, “but please allow me to introduce my second son, Mr. Gabriel Hartford.”

Gabriel, who was staring in awe at Jane, managed a shaky bow. His mother touched his arm gently and guided him out of the room, giving Mr. Bennet the privacy he sought.

“Father, why are you and Jane here?” Elizabeth asked again, though more calmly. She was thankful that the tea tray had arrived only a few minutes before; her father and sister looked worn, and hot tea would no doubt be a pleasant treat. She quickly poured two cups and prepared them for Jane and her father.

Mr. Bennet accepted his tea with a nod of thanks and said, “I am here, my dear Lizzy, to determine whether I am a fool, or you are. Kitty received a letter from Lydia which informed us that you, your aunt, and your uncle were in Brighton. Jane then shared the letter you sent to her, Elizabeth. Given that Lydia did speak of an elopement, I decided I must come to Brighton as quickly as possible, though in truth, I still ... but enough of that. We halted first at the Forster residence, but the colonel and Lydia were not at home, and Mrs. Forster was ill and unable to receive visitors. Now we are here, and I must request a straight answer: how is Lydia, and how goes your mission to save her from running off with the dastardly Wickham?”

Mr. Gardiner, who had kept his face studiously neutral through this recitation,

gestured to his brother by marriage and niece and said, "Please do sit down, both of you."

Bennet did, grumbling softly, and Jane, who was worn and pale from a long journey, took her place next to Elizabeth and reached out a hand to clasp her sister's in her own.

"Lydia is safe," Gardiner explained once the newcomers had seated themselves, "but she has had a trying, nearly disastrous day. She crept out of the Forster residence early this morning for a secret rendezvous with Wickham at the Promenade Grove, whereupon the lieutenant attempted to abduct her and carry her off in a hired carriage. Fortunately, Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam had arranged to keep close tabs on Wickham, and we were able to rescue her before any permanent harm was done."

Jane turned absolutely white at these words and swayed in place, causing Elizabeth to shift closer to her and place a comforting arm around her elder sister. As for Mr. Bennet, he was gazing at Gardiner as if the man had suddenly sprouted a second head.

"You are serious?" he finally croaked. "Wickham attempted to take Lydia by force?"

"We are," Mrs. Gardiner said with steel



in her voice. “Lydia was an unwilling participant, and Wickham struck her on the face when she continued to protest, but she, and by extension your daughters, are not ruined, for which we must all be grateful.”

“He hit her?” Jane gasped in horror.

“He did, and Lydia’s face will be badly bruised,” Elizabeth declared, pulling Jane closer still. “Wickham is indeed a complete villain, but my aunt and uncle are right that Lydia is safe now, and the lieutenant himself will be dealt with firmly by Colonel Forster, with assistance from Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam.”

Her father was wearing an expression she had truly never seen before; he was pale as a ghost, and looked entirely distraught. She leaned forward in concern and addressed him gently, “Father, do not be so dismayed! Lydia is no longer in harm’s way!”

He shook his head slowly, his head hanging in regret and dismay. “And if you had listened to me, if you had not intervened, she would have been lost forever, and her sisters ruined. While I rejoice in the salvation of our family, I can only be horrified by my own idiocy in this matter, Lizzy. I am so very

sorry.”

## Chapter 14

George Wickham, godson of George Darcy of Pemberley, gazed around his cell with disgust before lowering himself gingerly onto the cot, which was pushed up against the stone that formed the outer wall of the military prison in Brighton. The mattress promptly released a cloud of dust, causing him to cough a few times before the particles settled back onto the dingy gray blanket.

He pulled his legs up cautiously before leaning against the rough wall with a moan. How had a day with such promise resulted in his confinement in a dismal, smelly, damp jail? It seemed quite impossible!

It was Lydia's fault, of course. The fool of a girl had brought Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam down on his hapless head, and then the idiot had refused to run off with him like she promised! How many times had the girl said she loved him and wished to marry him? At least a dozen! And then, when he had faithfully paved the way for, if not a marriage, at least intimacy, she had decided she wanted to stay in Brighton to meet the Prince Regent. Imbecile!

Colonel Forster did not understand, of course, since Lydia had never expressed her passion for him. Naturally Forster was indignant over the matter, but that was not Wickham's fault, after all. When he was taken to trial, he would make it clear that it was entirely the Bennet girl's behavior which had led him to attempt to run off with her.

Again, he glanced around morosely. He had been in some dismal quarters in his life, but this was by far the worst. He hoped that it would not be long before this situation was resolved and he could leave Brighton. The militia had not proven a good situation for a man of his personality and talents.

In the distance, a door opened and steps approached, causing Wickham to sit up in anticipation. Seconds later, he was rewarded when Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, dressed in his full military uniform, appeared on the other side of the iron bars. Wickham glared at the man, and Fitzwilliam stared back.

Finally, the prisoner broke the silence and asked truculently, "What do you want, Fitzwilliam?"

"I suppose I am curious, that is all. Why did you do it, Wickham?"

George Wickham frowned. "Why did I do what?"

"Why did you attempt to abduct Miss Lydia Bennet? She is not an heiress; there seems little point, and substantial danger, in dragging away a girl of sixteen. I had thought you cared more about your own skin to do such a thing."

"I did not abduct her," Wickham snarled. "She wished to go with me."

"You tricked her into entering the carriage, and when she cried out to the driver to stop, you struck her on the face."

Wickham rolled to his feet and stalked over to regard the colonel through the bars. "I would not think I would need to explain to a man of the world that young women are volatile creatures. I assure you that Miss Lydia was all too eager to depart with me; she merely had her head turned by you and your ridiculous suggestion that she would meet the Prince Regent. I merely compelled her to follow through with her promise to me; surely you cannot fault me for that."

Colonel Fitzwilliam grimaced and said coldly, "It is utterly despicable that you would carelessly ruin the life of a young girl and by

extension her sisters, or are you pretending that you were actually planning to marry Miss Lydia, in spite of her lack of fortune?"

"I would have married her, for a price."

This provoked a look of genuine astonishment from Fitzwilliam. "A price?" he echoed. "I understand that Mr. Bennet is not a particularly wealthy man."

Wickham lifted his eyes heavenward. "Not Bennet, *Darcy*. I know you and your cousin are very close, Fitzwilliam; I have no doubt Darcy would pay well to pave your way to marriage."

Colonel Fitzwilliam shook his head in confusion. "Marriage? To whom?"

"You need not prevaricate," Wickham snapped. "You and Darcy arrived in Brighton along with Miss Elizabeth Bennet and her relations, and proceeded to act with the clear intention of drawing Lydia Bennet away from me. Darcy does not even admire Miss Elizabeth, so it must be you who are enthralled with the lady's beauty and vivacity – I do not blame you, Colonel. I find her quite appealing myself!"

The colonel stared at him for another moment and then laughed mockingly. "You

believe I plan to make an offer to Miss Elizabeth Bennet?"

Wickham scowled at his tormentor. "There is no other explanation."

The earl's son shook his head in amusement. "There is, but you are hardly worthy an explanation. I will confess that your plan had some merit, and can only be thankful that we took steps to have you followed by the gifted Mr. Smythe, who informed us that you had hired a carriage to take Miss Lydia away."

"Darcy," Wickham said abruptly, his eyes suddenly intent. "*Darcy* is pursuing Miss Elizabeth."

Richard chortled and said, "Now you have it! I confess it pleases me that you will go to your death aware that your last attempt to destroy Darcy's life was a complete and utter failure."

Wickham, who had been wondering how he could best turn this information to his advantage, felt as if he had been hit over the head by a rock.

"Death?" he stammered. "What?"

Richard Fitzwilliam's face was now set in grim lines. "Come, Wickham, you did not

actually imagine you could desert your division and abduct a gentleman's daughter without reaping dire consequences? Forster, Darcy, and I discussed having you transported to Australia, but we decided that it would hardly be fair to female prisoners and colonists to introduce a kidnapper and rapist into their society. You will be tried before a military court, and executed by firing squad."

Wickham grabbed the bars of the cell and swayed, his face pale, his pupils dilated with stark terror. "No, no! I did not ... you cannot! I am the godson of George Darcy! I did not ... Lydia said she would ... no! No!!!!"

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Lydia awoke with a cry of terror and sat up, looking around her fearfully. The image of George Wickham's angry countenance, his fist raised in fury, still hovered in her mind's eye, and it took a moment for her to remember that she was safely tucked away in a bedroom at the home of Lady Amelia Hartford.

"Lydia?" a soft, familiar, but surprising voice asked from the chair near the bedside.



“Jane?” Lydia asked, and then, as she recognized her eldest sister in the dim light of the room, exclaimed, “Jane! Is that truly you?”

“It is,” Jane assured her, rising to her feet. Lydia threw off her sheet and jumped up, leaping into her oldest sister’s arms.

“Jane! Jane! How glad I am to see you!”

“Oh, my dear Lyddy,” Jane murmured, repressing her surprise at this unusual welcome. “Are you well?”

Lydia shuddered and began to sob. “Oh Jane, it was terrible! Mr. Wickham tricked me into going in the carriage, and when I protested, he hit me. I am sure I am terribly bruised! Oh Jane!”

Jane patted the younger girl’s back soothingly and then pushed her back onto the bed. “My dear, I am sure you are thirsty and hungry, and I have some water and rolls for you. I am going to open the curtain a little to let in some light.”

Lydia, still crying softly, waited for her sister to part the blinds, which allowed the afternoon sunlight to spill into the room. When Jane turned around, she was shocked to observe that Lydia’s right eye was swollen

nearly shut and surrounded with bruised, darkening flesh.

Lydia put a careful hand up to her face and winced. "He hit me so very hard," she complained. "Is it badly bruised?"

"It is, but I am certain it will heal in time," Jane said. "Now, do move into the chair, my dear sister, and drink some water and eat a roll."

Lydia obeyed with surprising docility and began eating her roll and drinking the water. Jane sank down into another chair nearby and waited.

When the girl's thirst and hunger had been assuaged, she asked, "Jane, how can you possibly be here? Why are you not at Longbourn?"

"Father and I are both here, Lyddy. We received letters about Elizabeth and our aunt and uncle traveling here and also about Mr. Wickham. We had concerns that the man might attempt to harm you in some way and came rushing here. Fortunately, our uncle Gardiner, along with Mr. Darcy and his friends, were already watching out for you. We only arrived a few hours ago, so we were too late to help protect you from Wickham's

scheme. My dear sister, I am so very sorry. I knew that Wickham was not a particularly honest man, but I had no idea that he would do such a thing!”

Lydia stared in bewilderment. “What do you mean that Mr. Wickham is not honest? I thought you liked him!”

“Lizzy would say, and I am beginning to believe she is right, that I am too inclined to like everyone. But Wickham did not tell the truth about the supposedly stolen living, you know; Mr. Darcy gave him three thousand pounds to give up all rights to the living at Kympton and proceeded to slander his godfather’s son nonetheless. It is reprehensible that Mr. Wickham would do such a thing.”

“Colonel Fitzwilliam told me about the three thousand pounds,” Lydia murmured. She twined her fingers together in her lap and bowed her head. “I was stupid, was I not? I thought Mr. Wickham the best of men and was so looking forward to marrying him. Oh Jane!”

“Did he actually say he was going to marry you, my darling?”

“Oh yes! Indeed, he asked me to marry

him two weeks ago, and I said yes, and we were merely waiting for Wickham to obtain enough money so we could afford to go to Gretna Greene. Then yesterday I told him we had to wait to marry because I am going to meet the Prince Regent, and he seemed to understand, but this morning he tricked me, and he hit me, and oh Jane! Oh Jane, I loved him so much, but now I realize he is a monster!”

Jane dropped to the floor on her knees and reached out to embrace her sister, allowing the girl to keen out her distress. As for her own horrified dismay, she would need to wait for a more private time to contemplate it. Lizzy had been right all along. Wickham was a villain, Lydia was a fool, and the Bennet family had come very close to utter ruin.

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“Mr. Darcy, Colonel Fitzwilliam, Mr. Hartford, Lady Amelia, my dear brother and sister Gardiner,” Mr. Bennet proclaimed, looking around gravely at the occupants of the drawing room in Hartford House, “words are not adequate on such an occasion as this, but

all I have is words, so I will say them. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for saving my daughter and, by extension the rest of our family, from a terrible scandal. I suppose it is no great surprise that Lydia is a fool since her father is as well. Lizzy, you were entirely right that I should never have allowed Lydia to come to Brighton. I am most thankful for your courage in speaking to the Gardiners on this matter, as well as being willing to give up your own holiday to the North.”

Darcy, who felt quite uncomfortable at the sight of Mr. Bennet’s heartache and mortification, said, “Indeed, sir, I am overjoyed that we were able to intervene and save your daughter from a rogue. I feel myself to blame for much of what occurred here; I ought to have warned the people of Meryton about Wickham’s vile proclivities.”

“I daresay I would not have listened if you had, Mr. Darcy,” Bennet admitted and then added, “but I am certain none of you wish to listen to me lambast myself *ad infinitum*. I believe we are all thankful that Lydia is safe. I hope Wickham will be punished appropriately for his actions this morning?”

“He will die,” Darcy stated evenly.

Bennet looked startled at these bald words. "Will he? That is a harsh retribution indeed!"

Colonel Fitzwilliam said, "It is not the first time that Wickham has attempted to run away with an innocent young girl, sir, and if he does not reap the harshest discipline, he will doubtless do it again. If the abduction were not enough, Wickham attempted to desert in a time of war. No, it was either deportation or execution by firing squad, and when we consulted with Colonel Forster, we agreed that the man is too despicable to be foisted on the Australian colonists."

Concerned, Mr. Bennet drew closer to his second daughter and took her hand in his own. "Are you at peace with this decision? I know Wickham was once a favorite of yours."

Elizabeth swallowed hard and said, "I am at peace, Father, for I discovered months ago that Wickham looks like an angel on the outside and is a devil within. It is a great pity that a man of such looks and gifts has fallen so far, but he is a selfish, dangerous man. I can only pray that he will find peace with God before his end."

"We will pray for his soul," Mrs.

Gardiner agreed, “but I believe we must now speak of the future. Lydia ought not to be seen in society with her badly bruised face, but I doubt that she will take kindly to remaining confined here at Hartford House for more than a day or two.”

Bennet shrugged and said, “I daresay she will not, but it does not matter as I have every intention of carrying her back to Longbourn on the morrow along with Jane. After her escapades here in Brighton, I will be keeping a much closer eye on both Kitty and Lydia, I assure you!”

Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner exchanged a quick glance and Mr. Gardiner said, “Mrs. Gardiner and I thought you would wish to take Lydia home immediately, and of course we heartily concur. However...”

He trailed off and looked at his hostess. “Lady Amelia, would it be possible for me to meet with my brother and niece privately to discuss family business?”

“Of course,” the lady responded, rising hastily to her feet. “You can speak here. Come Darcy, Fitzwilliam, Gabriel – do join me in the conservatory. One of my rare caterpillars may have hatched in the last few

hours!”



## Chapter 15

Jane left Lydia sleeping again, and after asking a maid to sit with her, hurried down the main stairwell toward the drawing room. Somewhat to her surprise, she found Lady Amelia, Mr. Hartford, Mr. Darcy, and Colonel Fitzwilliam walking toward her down the corridor.

“Miss Bennet,” Lady Amelia said, “I believe your father and relations would like you to join their discussion within.”

“Thank you, Lady Amelia,” Jane responded.

“May I inquire as to how your sister is feeling, Miss Bennet?” Gabriel Hartford asked delicately.

“She is much distressed,” Jane answered and then added, “I have no doubt that she will be somewhat recovered in the morning. Lydia has an effervescent personality that is rarely deflated, although she is greatly shaken by today’s events. I can only say what has likely already been said by my father; thank you all for watching over my foolish little sister.”

“It was our honor, of course,” Mr.

Hartford said, his eyes drifting from the lady's blonde curls to her cerulean eyes to her rosebud lips. She was truly beautiful, Miss Jane Bennet.

"Indeed it was," Colonel Fitzwilliam agreed.

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"Ah, Jane, there you are," Mrs. Gardiner declared with satisfaction. "We were just about to discuss the return to Longbourn, but first, how is Lydia?"

"She is asleep again," Jane said, sitting down next to Elizabeth and reaching out to clasp her sister's hand in her own. "She is very distressed by what happened this morning, but she did promise Wickham that she would elope with him. The only reason she resisted today was that she wished to meet the Prince Regent before she ran away to Gretna Greene."

Jane paused, gulped, and tears sprang to her eyes. "Our family came very close to destruction."

"But you are not ruined," Mrs. Gardiner

said briskly. "Jane, you will need time to ponder and grieve over all that has come to pass, but we must speak of the future. Mr. Gardiner will need to return soon to his business, and there is no time for us to travel to Derbyshire now. I spoke to Lady Amelia an hour ago, and she said she would be delighted to host both Jane and Elizabeth in her home for a time; we propose that we travel with you and Lydia back to Longbourn, Brother Bennet, and leave your older girls here."

Bennet frowned. "Why would I do that? Jane and Lizzy are by far the most sensible of my daughters; it will be unpleasant enough at Longbourn with Lydia and Mrs. Bennet wailing about all that has come to pass. If Jane and Elizabeth remain here, it will be quite insupportable."

Mrs. Gardiner bent a commanding glare on her brother by marriage and said, "There are cogent reasons why Elizabeth, at least, should stay in Brighton a little longer, and I am quite certain that Jane would relish some time away from home."

Mr. Bennet looked at his second daughter and was surprised to see her face suffused with blushes and her eyes lowered in maidenly confusion. Since he had never seen

his daughter so affected, it took him a full thirty seconds to grasp what was occurring, whereupon he arched an amused eyebrow and asked, “My dear Lizzy, may I be told which gentleman has fallen under your spell, Colonel Fitzwilliam or Mr. Hartford? Or perhaps both of them are in love with you?”

Elizabeth bit her lip and flashed an indignant glance at her aunt, who met her gaze squarely and said, “Elizabeth, any courtship will be far more pleasant here in Brighton than at Longbourn, you must see that.”

Her niece could only concur with the truth of that statement and explained, “Neither Mr. Hartford nor Colonel Fitzwilliam, Father. It is Mr. Darcy.”

Mr. Bennet flinched and looked about the room, only to realize that even Jane did not seem startled.

“It appears that there is much I do not know about your interactions with that gentleman, Elizabeth,” he said. “I realize, too, that I have been too confounded with Lydia’s near disaster to consider what Mr. Darcy’s presence here means. How long has Mr. Darcy been pursuing you, my dear?”

“He offered for me in Kent when I was visiting Charlotte Collins,” the girl admitted. “I refused him with unbecoming passion, convinced as I was at the time that he was in the wrong and Mr. Wickham in the right regarding their past interactions. Mr. Darcy told me the truth of the matter and warned me of Mr. Wickham’s lies and degenerate nature. That is why I was so worried when I read Lydia’s letter; I knew that the man would never marry a penniless girl like my little sister, but I feared he would ruin her cheerfully enough.”

Gardiner picked up the tale by saying, “Elizabeth shared her fears for Lydia when we arrived at Longbourn, and Mrs. Gardiner and I decided we had best investigate the matter. I approached Mr. Darcy in London, who told me of his offer to Elizabeth as well as more information about Wickham, and he insisted on coming to Brighton with us. It was Darcy who introduced us to Lady Amelia, Darcy who summoned Colonel Fitzwilliam, and thus Darcy who is responsible for Lydia’s salvation.”

Mr. Bennet considered his second daughter thoughtfully and asked, “Elizabeth, have your feelings toward Mr. Darcy changed

in these last weeks?

“They have, sir, most profoundly. I confess that when I left Hunsford, while I absolved Mr. Darcy of blame concerning Wickham, I still considered him a proud, ill-tempered man. His behavior here in Brighton has shown me that I misjudged him profoundly; he has been all that is gracious and kind, and has sacrificed considerable time and energy in assisting us with Wickham. If he should renew his addresses, well, I believe I will accept him.”

Mr. Bennet leaned back in his chair and regarded her dolefully. Elizabeth had been his favorite daughter nearly since her birth, blessed as she was with her father’s quick wit, intelligence, and verve. He would miss her dearly if she wed, but he was not quite so selfish a father as to stand in the way of her happiness.

“Lizzy, you may stay in Brighton. Your aunt is correct that any courtship will be of far greater pleasure here than at Longbourn, especially given that Lydia and your mother will no doubt be kicking at the goads over Kitty and Lydia’s new restrictions. Jane, would you be willing to stay here and keep Elizabeth company?”

“I would be delighted, Father,” Jane responded with a grateful smile.

“Very well, then. Perhaps we can plan to leave tomorrow morning, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner?”

“Certainly,” Madeline assured him.  
“Now Jane and Elizabeth, I have a suggestion. You have had a wearying and worrying day; I am confident that two or three of the gentlemen would be pleased to escort you to the beach so you can enjoy the ocean winds and sunshine, to blow the cobwebs away. What do you think?”

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Jane, once she was actually standing on the shifting pebbles of the beach at Brighton, with the sun glittering in the afternoon sky, with the white crested waves rolling toward shore as if on the backs of sinuous blue horses, thought that her aunt was quite brilliant. She had never been to the ocean before, never looked out toward a horizon where dark blue met light, where the world seemed endless and ageless. It was an intimidating sight in its own way, but a beautiful one, and her anxiety

and distress over her family's troubles shrank in proportion to the enormous seascape before her eyes. Yes, she had been foolish to think that George Wickham could not possibly be as bad as Lizzy thought he was; in fact, he was worse. Yes, thanks to Mr. Bennet's indolence and Lydia's idiocy, the Bennet family had stepped to the very edge of a cliff named Destruction, but thanks to the grace of God, and the energy of family and friends, they were saved.

For now, she would breathe in the salty air and smile at the spray which blew against her face. For now, she would merely be thankful.

"Have you ever been to the sea before, Miss Bennet?"

She turned to smile up into the face of Gabriel Hartford, causing the gentleman's heart to thump energetically in his chest.

"I have not, Mr. Hartford. It is truly magnificent, do you not think? But perhaps since you are so familiar with it, the ocean no longer amazes you?"

"Not at all, Miss Bennet," he assured her, his gaze shifting to the glittering undulations of endless water. "I have lived in Brighton



much of my life, and yet the water changes so rapidly, rough and dark one day, bright and smooth another, that it always feels somewhat new.”

“I understand,” she responded and then, noting that her sister and Mr. Darcy were walking arm in arm some distance away, said, “Perhaps we could walk down the beach a little?”

“Of course,” Gabriel agreed, and shifted position so that the lady could take his only arm. She did not so much as glance at his missing limb and began walking carefully down the beach, appreciative of the firm support of the man at her side. She was thankful she had thought to bring half boots, as the pebbles under her would likely damage more fragile footwear.

“Mr. Hartford?”

“Yes, Miss Bennet?”

“I fear this is a dreadfully intrusive question, but I cannot help but wonder how you lost your arm?”

Mr. Hartford peered down at her approvingly and said, “I do not mind in the least; indeed, I find it frustrating when individuals stare but do not ask. I lost it while

fighting at the Battle of Corunna some four years ago.”

“I am sorry,” Jane responded, and halted to stare out once again at the distant horizon. “It is strange and tragic to think that beyond these waters is a land where men are struggling and fighting and dying to keep us free. I thank you for your service to the Crown, sir.”

“I was one of the fortunate ones, Miss Bennet, in that I survived with my life.”

She nodded solemnly at this, and they began walking again in pursuit of Darcy and Elizabeth, who were, based on the snatches of laughter and cheerful words they could hear, speaking happily with one another.

“Do you pity me, Miss Bennet?” Gabriel asked suddenly.

Jane looked up to inspect her companion’s face and was relieved to see that Mr. Hartford, while serious, did not look distressed.

“I do not believe I know enough about you to pity you, Mr. Hartford.”

“I lost my arm. Many would thus consider me an object of pity.”

Jane cogitated for a full minute, then spoke, choosing each word with care. "Our family lives near an estate called Netherfield Park, Mr. Hartford. Netherfield is owned by the Campion family, whose three children are all older than I am. The elder daughter, Emily was born with a clubfoot, with the result that she could never walk and run like other children."

"That is tragic."

Jane shook her head slowly and her beautiful lips tilted upwards. "It could have been tragic, but it was not. Emily developed a love for music at a young age, and was particularly gifted in the harp. She told me that because of her condition, she had extra time to study her passion. By the time she was fourteen years of age, she had exceeded the skill of any of the local masters, and her parents decided to move permanently to London so that she would have access to the best teachers available. Emily does not feel sorry for herself, and thus I do not feel sorry for her either. That is what I mean when I say I do not know you well enough to pity you. Certainly I grieve at your suffering, but I hope you are able to find joy in life as well."

He smiled suddenly, which transformed

his face from pleasing to genuinely handsome. “I do find joy, Miss Bennet. I usually live at my nearby estate of Beehaven, and I find pleasure and fulfillment in working the land and caring for my bees.”

Jane lifted a beguiling eyebrow. “So there are actually bees at Beehaven?”

He grinned. “Yes, there are many bees, and as odd as it sounds, they are my pride and delight.”

“Elizabeth tells me that Lady Amelia is very fond of butterflies, and you of bees. Does your older brother adore spiders, perhaps?”

Gabriel laughed at this, picturing his brother Michael solemnly observing spiders. “I fear that my brother, like my father before him, does not appreciate the insects of this world.”

“I find that reassuring, sir. Butterflies and bees have their charming aspects, but I quite despise spiders! Please, do tell me more of your delightful bees...”

Jane’s face was now vibrant with enthusiasm, which quite distracted Gabriel. He recovered sufficiently to respond, “It would be my pleasure to do so. May I suggest you visit my beloved Beehaven in the near future? I am

certain that my mother would enjoy escorting you and Miss Elizabeth to tour the estate.”

“That sounds perfectly lovely,” Jane responded and, by mutual accord, they continued their walk along the beach as Gabriel continued talking of his interesting experiences with bees.

## Chapter 16

Mr. Bennet sighed deeply as Colonel Forster, militia commander, stepped into the parlor at Hartford House. It had already been a thoroughly exhausting day, and he did not look forward to a painful conversation with the man who had been hosting his dunderhead of a daughter.

“Mr. Bennet,” Colonel Forster said, bowing formally. “I am overjoyed to see you here in Brighton, though I confess to feelings of humiliation as well. I apologize, most abjectly, for my failure to protect Miss Lydia while she was living under my very roof.”

Bennet gestured to a nearby chair. “Please, do sit down, Colonel. It has been a wearing day for all of us, and you most of all. I assure you that I do not fault you in the least for my daughter’s foolish behavior; it is I who bear the blame for permitting her to journey here when I should have known she would behave irresponsibly.”

Forster took the offered seat, but his bushy eyebrows were lowered in disapproval. “It is hardly Miss Lydia’s fault that a man under my command attempted to abduct her,

sir.”

Bennet poured a glass of brandy for his guest and then refilled his own. “Colonel, without a shadow of a doubt, Wickham is a scoundrel. The fact remains that Lydia crept away from the safety of your home this morning to enjoy a secret assignation with the man. I can only thank God that my daughter Elizabeth and my brother and sister by marriage chose to come here to Brighton to watch over Lydia when *I* should have taken steps to remove her from danger.”

“May I inquire as to why Miss Elizabeth believed Miss Lydia was in jeopardy?”

“Lizzy intercepted a letter from Lydia to my fourth daughter, Kitty, in which Lydia spoke of possibly eloping with Wickham. My second daughter knew that Wickham was not an honorable man, and sounded the alarm. Regrettably, I was too lazy to intervene, which left my relations to do what I should have done.”

“So Miss Lydia did agree to elope with him?” Forster asked in confusion. “Wickham claims that she did and thus it was an elopement, not an abduction.”

“Do wait a moment, Colonel,” Bennet

requested, rising to his feet and walking hastily out of the room. Three minutes later, he returned with Lydia on his arm, and Forster rose to his feet, swallowing convulsively at the sight of the girl's heavily bruised face and greatly swollen eye.

“As you can see, Colonel, Lydia changed her mind and did not go willingly. Wickham did snatch her, and struck her, and deserves severe punishment for his deeds.”

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“Lizzy?”

Elizabeth rushed to the door of her bedchamber and opened it, allowing Jane to enter from the corridor. “Oh Jane, I am glad you are here! We have not had much time to talk since you arrived.”

Jane embraced her favorite sister and said, “That is exactly why I am here, dear one. Please tell me, are you well? You must have had a trying and painful time since you left Longbourn.”

Elizabeth drew Jane to a small couch near the draped window, and the two sat



down together, relishing the comfort of sisterly affection.

“No, Jane, I have no complaints at all. Our aunt and uncle have been kindness itself, as have Lady Amelia and all the gentlemen, including Mr. Darcy. I would have been far more distressed if we had traveled north, as I would have been plagued constantly with fears about Lydia’s well-being.”

Jane moaned and admitted, “I realize I was dreadfully naïve about Mr. Wickham and can only be thankful that you and the Gardiners were sensible enough to intervene in a most dangerous situation. I have much to think about concerning this affair, which has shown me that my optimism about the goodness of men is obviously misplaced at times. I am grateful, at least, that this dreadful affair has allowed you and Mr. Darcy to find peace with one another, and perhaps something more.”

“I hope that there will be more as I am well on my way to loving him. I confess to some fears that Lydia’s actions are sufficiently shameful that he will not wish to align himself with our family.”

“I know that I have been too optimistic

about the general goodness of men, but in this case I believe I am right in saying that Mr. Darcy is a noble, generous man and will not blame you for the failings of our parents and sister.”

“I hope so.”

The two sisters sat in comfortable silence for a few more minutes and then Elizabeth spoke again, rather carefully. “How are you truly feeling?”

“What do you mean?”

“You have always thought the best of others; are you very distressed to discover that there are men like Wickham, who are all too ready to harm others for their own gain?”

Jane bit her lip and stared thoughtfully at a picture hanging on the wall, a painting of Brighton beach with colorful sailboats floating, apparently at anchor.

“I am distressed,” she said eventually, turning to look at her favorite sister, “distressed and angry and ... and a little ashamed, I think.”

“Ashamed? Why, dearest Jane?”

Jane’s brow wrinkled as she tried to put her thoughts into words. “I realize that my

optimistic view of humanity was truly foolish. The Bible is full of accounts of evil people, after all, and so is history. I think that I ... I wished to believe the best of others because it made the world seem safer. Does that make sense?"

"Of course it does! I do beg you not to be too hard on yourself, dearest. Your cheerful and loving disposition does you great credit."

"I would not care to be like Miss Bingley, of course," Jane mused, "who is a gossiping cynic, but I also ought to be more aware of the darkness in men's souls. My eyes have been opened to much that I refused to acknowledge in the past."

"I do not think you could ever be like Miss Bingley," Elizabeth said, looking with concern on her sister.

Jane leaned back and cogitated for a full two minutes, while her sister waited silently.

"I am angry at Mr. and Miss Bingley," Jane finally said in a rather surprised voice.

"Are you?"

"I am. Last December, when Mr. Bingley did not return to Netherfield, I insisted on blaming myself for reading too much into his

attentions in the autumn. But he did pay a great deal of attention to me, and he ought not to have left without a word of farewell. It was hurtful and rude, and I know people were whispering behind my back, not to mention that I had to listen to our mother moaning about it continually.”

“You are entirely correct, of course. Mr. Bingley treated you very ill indeed, though it could be argued that Mr. Darcy and Miss Bingley are largely to blame since they insisted that you did not love him.”

Jane shook her head dolefully. “No, you cannot excuse him that way, Lizzy. I will not permit it. Yes, Miss Bingley is a termagant and yes, Mr. Darcy ought not to have imagined he knew my heart, but it was Mr. Bingley’s responsibility to make up his own mind about our relationship, and if he wished to see me no more, he ought to have at least bid us farewell instead of hiding in London.”

“I cannot disagree with you, my dear.”

Silence fell again as Elizabeth pondered Jane’s words. It was a trifle disconcerting to hear such discourse from the lips of one of the most optimistic ladies in all of England, but all in all, Elizabeth could only be thankful.

“Lizzy?”

“Yes?”

“What can you tell me about Mr. Hartford, Lizzy?”

Elizabeth stared in some surprise at her sister, who promptly turned pink under her sister’s intense scrutiny.

“He is Lady Amelia’s second son,” Elizabeth said, “and owns an estate a short distance from Brighton. He lost his arm in the war.”

“Do you like him?” Jane inquired, making rather a point of smoothing her sleeve.

“I do like him, yes. He has been generous regarding Lydia’s escapades and most noble in assisting us to protect her. Mr. Darcy bribed the driver whom Wickham engaged to drive the hired carriage, and it was Mr. Hartford who replaced the driver when Lydia was abducted.”

“So he can drive with only one hand?”

“Oh yes! In truth,” Elizabeth said thoughtfully, “Mr. Hartford is so adept that I often forget that he is missing an arm. He has adjusted marvelously well to his disability.”

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“I want to see the Regent,” Lydia whined as she walked toward the carriage which would carry her back to Longbourn. “It is not fair!”

Jane, who could see her father was on the verge of an explosion, put a loving arm around her silly sister. “Dear Lyddy, you cannot possibly go out into society with your face so very bruised. No, my dear, perhaps you will return to Brighton another time and meet the Regent, but given what came to pass yesterday, you must go home.”

Lydia’s lip quivered but she nodded. “Indeed, I would be horribly ashamed if Pratt or Denny should see me like this. I look dreadful! Oh, what if I am disfigured forever?”

“My dear niece,” Mrs. Gardiner said, descending down the steps with her husband at her heels, “I assure you that in a few weeks, you will be as good as new. Now come, it is time to depart; we have a long day of traveling ahead of us.”

Lydia allowed herself to be guided into the carriage, and Mr. Bennet turned to face his

two eldest daughters along with Darcy and Hartford, all of whom had risen early to see the party off.

“My dear Jane and Elizabeth, thank you for your loving kindness toward your youngest sister and your foolish father. Mr. Darcy, Mr. Hartford, thank you again for assisting our family in such a sacrificial way. God bless you both for your goodness.”

The two men bowed and muttered inarticulate reassurances, and, after a last flurry of embraces, Mr. Bennet joined his youngest daughter and relations in the carriage. Within seconds, the coachman had started his horses and Elizabeth and Jane, arm in arm, watched as their family drew away.

When the vehicle was out of sight, Elizabeth turned toward the door with a soft sigh of relief; Lydia was away from Brighton, bruised but undefiled, and Elizabeth felt herself entirely relaxed for the first time since she read Lydia’s letter back at Longbourn.

“Miss Elizabeth?” Darcy said, looking down at her with his usual intensity.

“Yes?” she responded, smiling up at him in the pink light of dawn.

“Mr. Hartford and I were talking late last

night, and we wondered if you and Miss Bennet might enjoy accompanying us, along with Lady Amelia, to Mr. Hartford's estate of Beehaven this morning. He wishes to ensure that all is running smoothly at the estate, and it is a pleasant drive of only fifteen miles. We could stay for a day or two, perhaps?"

Elizabeth looked at Jane. "What think you, Jane?"

"I would be delighted to see Beehaven," Jane responded with pleasure. "The beekeeping sounds fascinating."

"Excellent," Gabriel responded. "Let us plan to leave around noon, then."

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"Well, what was the verdict?" Fitzwilliam demanded, rising from his seat in Forster's office in the militia barracks.

"Wickham was found guilty and will be executed this afternoon at four," Forster said grimly. He walked quickly to his desk and opened a drawer, pulled out a bottle of whiskey, and poured a large dollop into a convenient glass. He downed the liquor



quickly before asking, "Would you like some whiskey, Colonel Fitzwilliam."

"No, sir, but thank you," Fitzwilliam answered, leaning back into his chair with satisfaction.

"It is a bad business," Forster said, pouring himself another drink. "A bad business indeed. Did you hear that Wickham stole money from the rooms of some of his fellow officers before attempting to flee with Miss Lydia Bennet?"

"I did not hear that, but it does not surprise me in the least. Wickham is a thoroughly selfish man and looks upon both men and women solely as sources of money and pleasure. He seems incapable of true compassion and generosity. It is a great tragedy, but it is Wickham who sowed the wind and will now reap the whirlwind."

Forster nodded dismally. "You are entirely right. I mourn the loss of such promise and am also indulging in painful self-reflection over my own affection for the man; I found Wickham to be charming."

"He is charming, Colonel, which has always made him dangerous. I never cared for him much myself, but my uncle, Mr. George

Darcy, always held Wickham in the greatest of good will and esteem. He was never able to see the darkness underneath the engaging façade.”

Forster blew out a slow breath and, more slowly, poured himself another drink. “I plan to be slightly drunk at four this afternoon. I suppose I am rather soft, but to watch the life of an acquaintance end by firing squad is a grim thing.”

“It is,” the other man concurred. “I am convinced it must be done, but it is a tragedy.”

Forster rubbed his forehead and asked, “Do you believe Mr. Bennet would wish to be present at the execution? If so, it could be arranged.”

“No, sir,” Fitzwilliam assured him, “Mr. Bennet and Miss Lydia left for Longbourn this morning, and her sisters, who will be staying in Sussex for a while longer, are journeying to Mr. Gabriel Hartford’s estate for a few days. I believe it is better that way, given that Wickham’s execution will no doubt be a topic of conversation across town today. Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth would find such a discussion painful in the extreme, even though their sister’s name has been kept out of the

affair.”

“I quite agree,” Forster said, relieved.

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The sun shone in the deep blue sky, and puffy clouds frolicked high above like so many exuberant sheep. The summer air was warm, but the breezes which swept through the carriage made the journey toward Beehaven a comfortable one. Not, Darcy knew, that comfort was of any concern to him. Miss Elizabeth sat across from him in the carriage, flanked on one side by Miss Bennet and the other by Lady Amelia. She was always beautiful in his eyes, but today she looked relaxed and happy. He rejoiced that after many days of worry, Miss Lydia was secure and unspoiled, and safely on her way back home.

“Lady Amelia, Mr. Hartford, will you not tell us about Beehaven?” Jane requested. “Has it long been a haven for bees?”

Lady Amelia chuckled at this. “That was not the original vision for the estate, certainly. My husband, Mr. Hartford, purchased the estate of Gray Cliffs with the

intention of bestowing it on Gabriel, since our elder son, Michael, is heir to the Hartford ancestral estate in Kent. It was not, at the time of its purchase, in any way extraordinary; in fact, it had been rather neglected by the previous owners. Mr. Hartford repaired the house and worked with the tenants, but the demesne, which had been allowed to grow wild, proved to be a marvelous place for me to search for butterflies. My dear husband gave into my pleading, and allowed the acres behind the house to remain a wilderness.”

“When I returned from the Continent,” Gabriel continued, taking up the story, “I spent many months recovering from my wounds. I would often sit on the small mowed lawn behind the house and watch the bees and butterflies and birds buzzing and flitting and flying. To my delight and astonishment, the beauty of the wilderness brought not only peace to my mind, but also lessened my pain. Once I was well enough, I found myself fascinated by the bees in particular. One of my servants knew of the location of several hives, and once we had retrieved some of the honey, I came to wonder how bees chose where to build their hives, and what kinds of flowers they particularly enjoyed. I bought

books and pamphlets and spoke to other beekeepers, and now I can say, immodestly perhaps, that the estate is on the very forefront of beekeeping in all of England. Given that, and given that the estate has no cliffs at all, gray or otherwise, I changed the name to Beehaven.”

“It is a charming name,” Jane declared with approval. Not for the first time, Gabriel felt his stomach flip oddly. She was beautiful, yes, but serene as well, and was quick to both smile and bring smiles to those around her. She was a delightful woman, Miss Bennet of Longbourn.

## Chapter 17

The sun shone in the deep blue sky, and puffy clouds sailed serenely overhead, regally distant from the surreal terror of George Wickham. The disgraced lieutenant, dressed in the white garments of a condemned man, his hands bound behind him, was marched out of the prison barracks and into a courtyard, flanked by a pair of red coated privates. Wickham gazed around him with a mixture of incredulity and panic. It could not be, surely, that this was happening? It must be some kind of cruel joke, or a dreadful nightmare? He, George Wickham, godson of George Darcy of Pemberley, could not possibly be condemned to die. It was horribly, hideously, unimaginable.

Numbly, he marched through the courtyard and out to a grassy promenade, beyond which stretched the endless sea. One of his escorts turned him around to face the barracks as a squad of soldiers filed into position, cutting him off from the relative safety of the prison barracks.

Wickham gazed around desperately, hoping to see Darcy standing nearby. Surely

Darcy would not permit this to happen, would not allow his father's favorite to die so ignominiously.

There was no sign of Darcy, but Wickham, swallowing convulsively, recognized the faces of some of the fellow officers in the regiment: Pratt and Denny, Hamilton and Huntington. Pratt looked grim, Denny distressed, Hamilton angry. Well, it was Hamilton's fault, was it not, that the man made no attempt to secure his money in a safe place? Wickham had been desperate for funds when he had stolen from his fellow officers; it was hardly his fault that he found himself so very short of cash at a critical juncture.

The militia chaplain appeared at his side and Wickham heard dimly, through the rising terror, through the galloping of his heart, the Prayer for the Condemned Malefactor:

"Justly by man condemned to die, Jesus the desperate sinner's friend, Out of the deep regard our cry, And O! Let hope be in our end..."

He swallowed convulsively and swayed in place. No, no, it could not be! Surely it could not be that it had come to this, to a grassy knoll by the sea, to disgrace and

death...

The blindfold was placed around his eyes, blocking the sight of those who would kill him in cold blood. There was rustling, and soft murmuring, the sounds of muskets being loaded, the voice of Colonel Forster, slightly slurred.

“Ready, aim, *fire!*”

/

“What think you of the wilderness, Miss Elizabeth?” Darcy asked, looking down upon his beloved. The couple was standing a short distance behind Mr. Hartford’s estate house, with Mr. Hartford and Miss Bennet seated on a bench some fifty feet away to provide appropriate oversight.

Elizabeth looked around with interest and said, “It is a very *wild* wilderness, is it not? Save for the paths cut through the foliage, it looks almost entirely neglected.”

“Do you disapprove?”

Elizabeth knit her brows at this and began wandering farther away from the house with Darcy, of course, at her side.



“I do not disapprove, precisely,” the lady finally said. “My natural inclination is to dislike it because it is so unkempt, and the flowers and plants are dull compared to, for example, the Promenade Grove in Brighton. However, Mr. Hartford explained the matter very clearly on the carriage ride here; the bees prefer certain flowers, and Mr. Hartford has deliberately chosen to encourage the growth of what we would call weeds, because such plants enable the bees to thrive.”

Darcy placed his right hand on his love’s small hand, which was tucked in his left arm and said, “I quite agree that the demesne looks untidy and I fear that Lady Catherine would disapprove mightily, but as you said, these humble flowers have a very definite purpose.”

“For that matter, wheat and oats and corn look rather uninspiring from an aesthetic standpoint,” Elizabeth mused. “This uncultivated field is necessary for the harvest of honey. You are quite right about your aunt, however; Lady Catherine would be horrified at the very sight of so much poorly behaved vegetation. The gardens of Rosings Park were always meekly obedient to the commands of their mistress.”

Darcy laughed at this and she looked up

at him, her lips curved upward in delight. When she had first met Mr. Darcy, she had never imagined that he could look so carefree, so relaxed, so happy. She knew him to be a sensible, brave, intelligent, noble, kind man, but he could also laugh, and she dearly loved to laugh.

/

“What do you think of our wilderness, Miss Bennet?” Gabriel asked, rather nervously.

Jane looked up at Gabriel, who was seated by her on a bench under a spreading oak tree, and said, “It is very interesting, sir. It is not a conventional demesne, certainly, but I find great appeal in the thought of God’s natural creation being the perfect food for bees. Where do your bees live?”

Gabriel gestured with his lone arm toward the east and explained, “The hives are some half a mile distant from the house; in general, the bees are not particularly prone to stinging, but we would not care to have the henhouse and barn and stable within very close proximity to the hives. The bees will fly several miles in search of food if they need it.”

“That is sensible. I can imagine that the servants would be uneasy if collecting eggs within a short distance from swarms of bees.”

“Precisely.”

Silence fell for a full, comfortable minute. Jane gazed affectionately at Elizabeth and Darcy, who were staying within eyeshot, though not earshot. She did hope that Lizzy and the master of Pemberley would make a match of it. They were truly compatible, and Jane was quite certain that Elizabeth’s feelings had changed over these last months from contempt and dislike to reluctant respect to appreciation and now to affection and love. Of course, Mr. Darcy might well not offer again; it was a rare gentleman who would ask a lady to marry him a second time.

“Miss Bennet?”

Jane looked up at her companion, who was staring at her. “Yes?”

“Miss Bennet, I have a question to ask you, but I would beg that you be honest. Please, do not prevaricate for fear of distressing me. I would far prefer truth to kindly lies.”

The eldest daughter of Longbourn sat up a little straighter and said, “I assure you, sir,

that I am not in the habit of lying to my acquaintances.”

He nodded and continued, “My question is this. Would you ever consider marrying a man like me, who is not whole, who is permanently disabled?”

Jane’s mouth dropped open in astonishment and she regarded her companion with incredulity. “Are you...are you making me an offer, Mr. Hartford?”

Gabriel flushed and shook his head. “No, please forgive me for being confusing. No, we only met yesterday, and certainly do not know one another well yet. But I find myself greatly drawn to you, Miss Bennet. It is not just your beauty, which is considerable, but your kindness, your serenity, your gentle nature, all of which I find most attractive. However, I am well aware of what I am; a man without an arm, with a peculiar fascination with bees. I do not, in any way, wish to pressure you. I merely wondered whether you would ever consider a union with a man in my position.”

Jane stared into the man’s brown eyes, noting the flecks of gold in them, and then her gaze shifted to Gabriel’s forehead and cheeks,

both of which were creased from years of squinting in the harsh sun of Portugal. He was a good man, she knew, a hardworking man, a kind man, and a courageous man to forge onward in life after such a great injury. For a brief moment, she contemplated her first love, Charles Bingley, who had been more handsome and whole; there was a small corner of her heart which was still fond of Bingley, but she had learned pragmatism in the last days. Mr. Bingley had willingly walked out of her life, and here was a good man asking her a pertinent question.

“Yes,” she said abruptly. “Yes, I would marry a man like you, if we found we loved one another.”

“You are quite certain that you are not merely humoring me? I realize that you, with all your beauty, could well expect to marry a man who...”

“Your missing arm does not matter to me,” Jane interrupted fiercely. “You lost it in war, sir, a war which is being fought to protect women like me from the Corsican Tyrant. I grieve over the pain you must have experienced, and am thankful you survived and are thriving as a master of an estate with, yes, an interesting fascination with bees. But

perhaps given your own mother's fondness for butterflies, your passion is no great surprise."

Gabriel grinned at this and said, "My father, who was a rather traditional gentleman, could never quite understand my mother's excitement for her winged darlings, as she called them. Nevertheless, he loved her enough to build the conservatory at Hartford House for her use. My elder brother is likewise bemused by my bees, but he is kind enough not to tease me about them."

"My dear Elizabeth loves to roam and ramble through the countryside, and neither I nor my sisters have her stamina or enthusiasm for long walks. I believe siblings commonly have different interests; the key is for everyone to accept the interests of their loved ones, so long as they are not dangerous interests, at any rate."

"I agree," Gabriel said, and gathering his courage, continued, "Miss Bennet, would you be willing to enter a courtship with me? I assure you that there would be no commitment on either side; this is merely a desire to come to know one another better. Or if that is presuming too much, I would be happy..."

Again, she interrupted him. "Yes, I would be delighted with a courtship, Mr. Hartford. I admire and like you, and here in Sussex, we are free from the frantic flutterings of my mother. But I feel I really must warn you about my mother, sir. My sister Lydia's foolishness is largely due to my father's former indolence and my mother's indelicate ways. She is the daughter of a solicitor, you see. If that puts you off, I entirely..."

This time, he interrupted her. "I have no quarrel with the daughter of a solicitor, Miss Bennet, especially a woman who bore as lovely a lady as yourself."

They fell into silence now, gazing at one another, and Jane, while she was embarrassed, felt a surge of hope and excitement in her heart.

/

"Miss Elizabeth?" Darcy said huskily.

They had wandered almost, but not quite, out of sight of the house and Gabriel and Jane and he suddenly felt that this was the moment for which he had been waiting.

“Yes, Mr. Darcy?” Elizabeth asked. The look on her escort’s countenance was solemn, and his eyes gazed on her with adoration, and her heart pounded rapidly within her chest.

“I know that back at Hunsford, I proposed marriage in the most revolting of ways...”

“Pray do not remember that time,” Elizabeth interposed. “We neither of us behaved well, and we both have learned much from our early interactions.”

He nodded, blew out a breath, and spoke carefully, “Miss Elizabeth Bennet, I have loved you for many months for your kindness, your wit, your beauty, your intelligence, your diligence, and your courage. I long to make you my wife. Miss Elizabeth, will you accept my hand in marriage?”

“Yes,” she responded quickly, tears filling and then spilling out of her eyes. “Yes, Mr. Darcy. I love you and very much wish to be your wife.”

He reached out his hands to clasp her own, and lifted them fervently to his mouth to press his lips on her precious fingers. He was shaking with joy and incredulous delight. She would be his! He would be hers! Praise the



Lord on High!

/

Lady Amelia Hartford, who had been wandering the paths of the wilderness in search of rare butterflies, stumbled onto Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy standing *very* closely together and cleared her throat, causing the couple to draw apart rapidly. She lifted an inquiring eyebrow and was amused to see that the young couple looked both joyful and embarrassed.

“Is there something I should know?” she inquired archly.

“Lady Amelia,” Darcy said, his voice trembling with emotion, “I am overjoyed to report that Miss Elizabeth has agreed to become my wife.”

## Chapter 18

Colonel Fitzwilliam leaned back on the most comfortable chair in the drawing room of Hartford House and placed his feet on a convenient wooden stool. A bottle of red wine sat on a small table to his right, and the windows were open, allowing the sea breeze to wash away the last overheated air from the mid afternoon sun.

Fitzwilliam poured himself a glass of wine, took a deep draught, and leaned back in his chair. He was alone in Hartford House except for the servants, and while he could have followed after the rest of the company to Mr. Hartford's estate this afternoon, he was thankful that he had chosen to stay behind in Brighton for one night. The day had been an exhausting, challenging, hard one, and he would have found it difficult to maintain his cheery demeanor in company. He closed his eyes in weariness and, to his surprise and distress, a grim image instantly leapt into his mind's eye, that of the unmoving form of George Wickham lying on green grass, crimson blood stains spread across his white clothes.

He cursed softly and took another sip of wine, willing the vision away. He was a colonel in the Regulars, after all, and had seen men die before, some of them friends. He had disdained George Wickham for many years and, after the man's foul attempt to run away with Georgiana Darcy, his disdain had turned to genuine loathing.

Nonetheless...

He had visited Pemberley several times as a child, when his uncle Darcy had still lived, when he and Darcy and Wickham had climbed trees and caught frogs and wheedled fruit tarts from the cooks in the great kitchens. He had been friendly enough with the cheerful, charming boy who had grown into a rogue, who had finally taken a step which proved fatal.

He could not regret the death of Wickham, who had been all too ready to destroy the reputation and lives of an entire family of innocents. But he grieved the necessity, without a doubt, and prayed that the image imprinted on the back of his eyelids would fade soon into comforting darkness.

"Excuse me, sir," a male voice said tentatively.

The colonel opened his eyes and sat up a little, regarding Lady Amelia's butler irritably. "Yes?"

"Sir," the man said, "I do apologize for disturbing you, but a Mr. Bingley has arrived from London and says that Mr. Darcy invited him with Lady Amelia's blessing. Do you know the gentleman?"

Fitzwilliam surged to his feet and nodded. "I do! Please show him in!"

/

Dinner was over, as was the separation of the sexes after the meal, and Lady Amelia gazed around the drawing room at Beehaven in satisfaction. She considered herself a practical woman in many ways, but in the deepest recesses of her heart, she was also a romantic. Too often her young acquaintances married entirely for pragmatic considerations, and thus she rejoiced in the new engagement of Mr. Darcy and Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Elizabeth, who was vibrant, intelligent and beautiful, was beaming with delight and Darcy's eyes kept straying to rest upon the lovely visage of the woman who had agreed to

be his wife. They would, Lady Amelia thought, be very happy together.

“I must ride to Longbourn to ask your father’s permission,” Darcy said with a fond smile at his fiancée.

“Of course,” Elizabeth agreed joyfully. “I suppose that Jane and I should return with you so that my mother can begin making wedding preparations.”

To Lady Amelia’s surprise, Jane cleared her throat rather ostentatiously, drawing the attention of the party. “Elizabeth, if you feel it incumbent on you to depart immediately, naturally I will not stand in your way, but...”

She trailed off and Elizabeth leaned forward curiously. “But what, Jane?”

“But I asked Miss Bennet if she would be willing to engage in courtship with me,” Gabriel explained diffidently. “But Miss Bennet, if you depart immediately for Hertfordshire, I can follow you. Do not let that concern you.”

Lady Amelia, to her considerable shock and embarrassment, found herself crying. Jane, not surprisingly, looked horrified, which prompted her hostess to rush into speech. “Oh, Miss Bennet, I am so very happy. Not

that there is anything settled between you and my son, of course, but you are a lovely young woman and oh, I do apologize. I am rarely such a weeping willow, I assure you!”

Jane smiled and reached out to grasp the older woman’s hand in her own. “I am delighted that you are pleased with my new friendship with Mr. Hartford, Lady Amelia. I too do not know where it will end, but I believe we are both relishing the opportunity to know one another better.”

“Given that,” Elizabeth piped up, having had a hurried consultation with Darcy, “it seems wise for Fitzwilliam to wait to call on Father. Longbourn is no doubt a riotous place right now and once Mother knows I am engaged to a wealthy man, it will grow noisier still. There is truly no hurry; Father departed for home with the knowledge that Fitzwilliam and I were courting. We should give you and Mr. Hartford a few days together here at least, if that is convenient for you, Lady Amelia?”

“A few days, a week, a month, a year, a decade,” the older woman declared with an extravagant gesture. “You are my dear friends now, and my house is yours.”

/

“So Miss Bennet is here in Brighton?” Bingley inquired eagerly. He had been shown to his room to refresh himself from his journey, and was now seated across from Colonel Fitzwilliam enjoying a glass of Madeira.

“Miss Bennet, along with her sister Miss Elizabeth, Darcy, Lady Amelia Hartford, and her son Gabriel, are staying in the country some fifteen miles away,” Fitzwilliam explained. “They left this morning and I intend to follow after them tomorrow, as I am interested in seeing Mr. Hartford’s estate.”

“Ah, what a pity that I missed them before their departure! I intended to come to Brighton yesterday, but my younger sister needed me to escort her to the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly.”

“You are certainly welcome to accompany me tomorrow, Bingley, so long as you need not return to London immediately.”

“No, no, I am quite at leisure to remain and will accompany you with pleasure,” Bingley said enthusiastically. “This is a good Madeira, by the way.”

“Yes, Lady Amelia has an excellent cellar.”

“Marvelous. Now I hope you do not mind me asking – who is Lady Amelia Hartford, Colonel Fitzwilliam? Is she a friend of yours?”

“No, she is an acquaintance of Darcy’s through his mother, Lady Anne. Lady Amelia and Lady Anne were close friends when they were young women, and when Miss Elizabeth and her relations needed a place to stay here in Brighton, Lady Amelia kindly opened her home.”

“That is very generous of her, and I do look forward to making her acquaintance and to give my own thanks, as she was kind enough to allow me to stay here as well. I assume my purpose here is obvious enough, Colonel; I am pursuing Miss Bennet.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam grinned. “I guessed as much, and I wish you well. She is a delightful lady.”

“She is an angel! It is not merely her beauty, which is remarkable, but her gentle spirit as well. I am most grateful to Darcy for informing me that Miss Bennet was indeed attached to me when I left Netherfield last



fall.”

The colonel knitted his brow at this and said slowly, “So you truly believed she was indifferent?”

Bingley grimaced and said, “I thought she cared for me, but my sisters and Darcy convinced me otherwise. I do regret that I had not the determination to pursue her last autumn, but Darcy seemed very certain that she did not return my regard. In addition, well, I do not know if you aware of the legal situation regarding the Longbourn estate?”

“I am. Mr. Collins, who is clergyman for my aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, is the heir to Mr. Bennet.”

“Precisely. I feared that Miss Bennet would be pressured into accepting my offer when she did not care for me, and she is such a beautiful, kind woman; it would be a tragedy if she was forced to marry for pecuniary reasons alone.”

The colonel shrugged and said, “That is an unusual perspective among the gentry, Bingley. When I marry, I must consider the dowry of any prospective bride. As the second son of an earl, I have habits of expense which will not allow me to wed a penniless lady. It

is the way of our world that money must be a consideration for most gentlemen and ladies. You and Darcy are fortunate that both of you can marry a lady who will not bring much money into marriage.”

Bingley looked amused. “Darcy *could* marry a penniless woman, I suppose, but I believe there are few heiresses as wealthy as Anne de Bourgh. I understand Darcy and Miss de Bourgh have been nominally engaged since they were in their cradles.”

Fitzwilliam laughed and shook his head. “Why do you think Darcy is here in Brighton, Bingley?”

The man frowned, looked puzzled, and then his bemusement cleared away to be replaced by understanding. “He is pursuing Miss Elizabeth?”

“Precisely. So no, I believe Darcy has no intention of offering for my cousin Anne.”

Bingley leaned back again in satisfaction. “That is entirely delightful. I wish him and Miss Elizabeth very well, and if Miss Bennet does me the honor of accepting my hand in marriage, we will be brothers!”

Elizabeth woke up in some confusion. The light seemed wrong, and the bed, and the room, and there were strange sounds outside the open windows of ... of ... were those cows?

Memory flooded back and she relaxed back into her pillow, her face illuminated with joy. She was engaged to Mr. Darcy of Pemberley! He had asked for her hand in marriage only yesterday as they meandered amongst the wildflowers in the field behind Beehaven.

A soft sigh from her right made her turn over to regard her sister Jane, who was curled up facing her, her face peaceful in sleep. That was another reason for joy; Jane was now being courted by a generous and honorable man, Mr. Gabriel Hartford. Of course, the fledgling friendship between her elder sister and Mr. Hartford might well end without an engagement. After all, Jane's experience with Mr. Bingley of Netherfield had shown her that admiration did not always result in an offer of marriage. For now there was, at least, hope that her sister would find love and security with a good man.

## Chapter 19

“We are ready to begin, sir!” the servant called out, his face muffled by the peculiar covering across his face.

“Begin!” Gabriel called back. He usually assisted in removing honey from the hives, but given that he had guests with him, he had chosen to stand some fifty feet away from the hive on rising ground where the view was clear.

“It seems a very dangerous procedure,” Jane said nervously, clutching Gabriel’s arm tightly.

Gabriel wished he had another arm to pat her slender hand, but since he did not, he made his voice reassuring, “I promise you that my men are experienced with the bees, and there is no cause for alarm.”

“They never sting, then?” Elizabeth asked curiously, with her own hand placed on Darcy’s arm. “Or are your servants safe only because of their protective garments?”

“That is an excellent question, Miss Elizabeth. Those white robes, with the wicker covering to protect my men’s faces, are

important. However, the smoke is also vitally important; for reasons that are not understood yet, the smoke makes the bees drowsy and less prone to stinging.”

“I believe in Derbyshire, the beekeepers kill the bees before removing the honey,” Darcy commented.

“Yes, regrettably that is common across England,” Hartford said. “It is unfortunate on a number of counts – it is a great pity to kill so many of these useful insects, plus it limits how much honey can be made when an entire colony is destroyed every time the honey is harvested. I have been studying the work of Thomas Wildman and Francois Huber, both of whom invented skeps which permit the honey to be harvested without killing the bees. It is still not a perfect process and regrettably we have difficulty removing the honey easily at times; the bees, of course, do not understand our purpose, and thus build awkward beeswax structures which frustrate our efforts sometimes. However, I have confidence that as apiarists continue to study these marvelous creatures, we will learn how best to manage them.”

“You have already made great strides,” Darcy said respectfully. “I hope that you are

willing to share your knowledge with me; I would like to begin tending bees in Pemberley.”

“You will find, Mr. Darcy, that once I begin to speak of bees, it is difficult to silence me!”

The ladies chuckled and then all four lapsed into interested silence. The two servants carefully smoked the bees’ home and then lifted the top. Even from fifty feet away, the onlookers could hear ominous buzzing and Jane tightened her grip still more, causing Gabriel to look down on her in concern.

“Would you prefer to move farther away, Miss Bennet?”

“No, no. I am not afraid for us but for your men. I do hope they will be safe.”

He smiled down at her, marveling inwardly. It was a rare lady indeed who was so concerned about the health and well-being of servants; many members of the gentry were only interested in their underlings insofar as it affected their own comfort and happiness. It was yet another reason to admire Miss Bennet.

Silence fell for another ten minutes as the servants carefully removed dripping combs of honey and then cautiously replaced the top

of the skep, put out the smoking fire, and retreated to safety.

“Oh, that was marvelous,” Elizabeth enthused as the foursome began walking back toward the house. “Do the bees continue to produce honey throughout autumn?”

“They will continue to make honey when there are flowers available,” Gabriel explained. “We do not take all the honey, of course; they require substantial stores to carry them through the winter. Presumably, they also feed their young with honey. There is still much to learn about their colony life, which seems to be quite complex.”

“Butterflies are complicated as well, and to my mind, far more beautiful,” Lady Amelia declared, striding vigorously from behind the house.

“But butterflies do not make honey, Mother!” Gabriel teased. “They are quite useless.”

Lady Amelia wagged an admonitory finger and said, “Now, Gabriel, I refuse to be drawn into this argument again, because I am quite ecstatic. I just saw a heath fritillary, Gabriel! They are very rare, you know.”

“Congratulations, Mother!”

“I do believe that is Colonel Fitzwilliam!” Elizabeth exclaimed suddenly, having caught sight of an approaching pair of horsemen. “He has someone with him, too!”

Darcy took a step forward and, squinting into the bright sunlight, focused on the other man’s face.

“Is that ... surely it could not be Mr. Bingley?” Elizabeth cried in astonishment.

Jane Bennet froze as if turned to stone, causing Mr. Hartford to look down on her in concern. Who was Mr. Bingley?

/

Bingley, who had pushed his horse ahead of Colonel Fitzwilliam’s steed in his enthusiasm, felt a rush of ecstasy when the face of his love, Miss Jane Bennet of Longbourn, finally came into focus. She was standing in front of a gray brick house, dressed in a simple blue gown, and a few of her blond ringlets had escaped the confines of her hat and were twisting beguilingly in the summer breeze.

He halted his horse and swung down,



only to realize, belatedly, that while he was very happy to see Miss Bennet, she looked embarrassed to see him.

A moment later, his eyes shifted away from his beloved to that of Miss Elizabeth Bennet, whose forehead was creased in a disapproving frown, onto an older woman, who looked curious, then onto a man who was missing an arm, and then onto Darcy who looked, frankly, miserable. What was happening?

“Good morning, Colonel Fitzwilliam,” Lady Amelia said, stepping forward to take control of the situation. “Would you kindly introduce us to your friend?”

“Yes, of course,” Fitzwilliam said, who was bewildered by the emotions playing across the faces of his cousin and the Bennet ladies. “Lady Amelia, Mr. Hartford, this is Darcy’s good friend, Mr. Bingley. Mr. Bingley, Lady Amelia and Mr. Hartford, and of course you know Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth.”

The ladies and gentlemen bowed and curtsied appropriately, and Bingley said hesitantly, “Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, it is wonderful to see you again.”

Elizabeth’s eyes were narrowed and she

said, "It is quite astonishing to see you here, Mr. Bingley."

"Indeed, it is," Jane added acerbically.

Not surprisingly, these responses flummoxed the newcomer rather badly. "Yes, that is, er, Darcy suggested that I come to Brighton and ... well, when I arrived, the colonel informed me that you were here. I apologize for coming without an invitation..."

He was rambling, he knew, and forced himself to close his mouth. His brain was whirling with confusion, because Miss Elizabeth was clearly displeased, and Miss Bennet, along with looking distressed, was standing quite closely to Mr. Hartford.

"No, of course you are very welcome," Lady Amelia assured him quickly. "I hope you and Colonel Fitzwilliam will come in directly and refresh yourselves."

"Perhaps I might show Bingley the wilderness behind the house?" Darcy interpolated. "I am certain he would be most interested in learning more about how to keep bees."

"That would be marvelous," his friend said hastily.

"I will take the horses to the stable,"

Colonel Fitzwilliam said.

/

“Who is Mr. Bingley?” Lady Amelia demanded once the rest of the party had made their way into the drawing room. “I know, of course, that he is a friend of Darcy’s and I was pleased to have him stay with us in Brighton, but it seems from your reaction that there is some history of which I am unaware?”

Jane sighed and sat down on a cushioned settee. “It is a complicated situation, Lady Amelia.”

“It is not *very* complicated,” Elizabeth contradicted. “Last autumn, Mr. Bingley leased an estate called Netherfield near our family home of Longbourn. He pursued Jane very openly for some weeks, and then, due to the interference of his sisters and Mr. Darcy, left for London at the end of November and never returned or so much as sent word as to his intentions.”

“Darcy interfered?” Lady Amelia demanded.

“Yes, because he did not believe Jane

truly cared for his friend.”

Gabriel Hartford’s heart was in his throat. “I have no right to ask this, Miss Bennet, but are you attached to Mr. Bingley? Because if so, I would gladly set aside my...”

“No,” Jane insisted, and then smiled shyly. “I do apologize. I seem to make a habit of interrupting you. I was attached to Mr. Bingley; indeed, I believed myself to be in love with him. But his behavior since last November has quite discouraged me, and I have no desire to renew my close acquaintance with him. I am very happy with our courtship and will not permit Mr. Bingley to interfere with it.”

Gabriel, who had been holding his breath throughout this recitation, let himself breathe again, and smiled joyfully.

/

“What is going on, Darcy?” Bingley asked, wandering in an agitated manner in the general direction of the beehives. “Who is this Mr. Hartford?”

Darcy, while upset, was sensible enough

to avoid getting stung, so he grasped his friend's arm and turned him around so they could walk in safety toward the wild region behind the house.

"I am sorry," he said humbly. "Mr. Hartford is a former military man and owner of this estate, and Lady Amelia's second son. He and Miss Bennet..."

"Are engaged?" Bingley finished with a miserable gulp.

"No, no, not engaged. They have decided to conduct a courtship, that is all."

The tradesman's son groaned softly and said, "It does not bode well for my chances with the lady, however. Have they known one another long?"

Darcy bit his lip and admitted, "They only met two days ago."

His friend stopped and turned, his face whitening with shock. "Two days? Two *days*? How can they be courting after only two days?"

Darcy shrugged unhappily, "Mr. Hartford was smitten with Miss Bennet almost instantly, and Elizabeth, who has known Mr. Hartford longer than Miss Bennet, no doubt assured her sister of his good character. I do

believe him to be a most honorable gentleman, Bingley.”

His friend, who was struggling with crushing disappointment, jolted slightly and asked, “Elizabeth? Does that mean...?”

“Yes,” Darcy said, caught between joy at his own situation and sorrow for his friend’s. “Yes, Elizabeth agreed to be my wife yesterday. We are to be married.”

Bingley clenched his teeth so hard that they hurt, but he was a generous friend and, even in the midst of his own misery was able to say, “Congratulations, Darcy. I wish you all imaginable happiness.”

“Thank you. I do feel guilty, I assure you. I gave you very poor advice back in Hertfordshire and after Elizabeth told me in the spring of her sister’s attachment to you, I should have written immediately, but I felt uncertain as to both your inclination and your location, so I do apologize, Bingley.”

Charles Bingley sank onto a wooden bench under a spreading elm tree and stared dismally toward a gently waving stand of cattails. “It is not your fault, Darcy. I ought to have followed my own heart last autumn. And as for your letter – I received it a few

days ago and waited too long to come here to Brighton. I am to blame for this debacle, all of it. If Miss Bennet finds love with another, I cannot resent her decision in any way.”

Darcy sat down next to his friend and stared sadly at the ground. He was so very happy with Elizabeth, and if he had only held his silence last autumn, Miss Bennet would now be Mrs. Jane Bingley and he and Charles would soon be brothers by marriage.

The two sat in melancholy silence for another ten minutes, and then Bingley rose slowly to his feet. “I am aware the situation is awkward and will thus return to Brighton today and London tomorrow. Congratulations again, my friend.”

Darcy stared at the other man with consternation. “I am quite certain that Lady Amelia and Mr. Hartford would be willing to let you stay overnight, Bingley, either here or back in town.”

“Do you and your party return to Brighton today?”

“We plan to return tomorrow or the next day, but you need not ride immediately back to Brighton.”

“I do, Darcy, I do. I would not, for all

the world, be a source of discomfort to Miss Bennet. I will plan to spend the night at Hartford House by the ocean and will return to London tomorrow. I am quite resolved.”

Darcy stood up and said hesitantly, “There is one other thing you should know, Bingley.”

“Yes?”

“Miss Bennet was in London earlier this year for three months. She called on Miss Bingley, and your sister behaved with sufficient coldness that Miss Bennet realized the friendship was at an end. I knew of the lady’s presence in London, and did not inform you. I apologize again for my interference, and ... if you do find love again, I hope you will remember that your sister is all too ready to interfere if she does not approve of your choice.”

Charles Bingley’s jaw was clenched and his hands tightened into fists. “You concealed Miss Bennet’s presence? You and my sister? How dare you, Darcy?”

“I was a fool,” Darcy answered, his head drooping. “I could not regret it more.”

Bingley gritted his teeth and glared at his friend before slumping morosely and



declaring, "It remains my fault, Darcy. I am to blame for letting both you and my sisters lead me about by the nose. I can only hope that I will learn something from this excruciatingly painful experience."

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"Whatever has happened?" Colonel Fitzwilliam demanded as Bingley disappeared out of sight on the road back to Brighton.

Darcy moaned and explained, "Bingley came here in pursuit of Miss Bennet, but she and Mr. Hartford are courting."

"No! Already? They only met two days ago!"

"It seems that unlike me and Bingley, Mr. Hartford is able to come to rapid decisions where lovely ladies are concerned."

The colonel sighed and leaned against the outer wall of the stable, stretching out his limbs after his ride. "A pity, but sometimes life moves on while we are cogitating."

"I feel very much at fault," Darcy said miserably. "It was I who encouraged Bingley to stay away from Miss Bennet. If I had kept

my own counsel, they would likely be happily married.”

“Stop it, Darcy,” his cousin ordered. “It was Bingley’s decision to stay away from Miss Bennet, not yours. He must learn to stand on his own two feet, and perhaps this disappointment will help him develop a backbone.”

“All the same...”

“No, I will not hear you lambast yourself further,” Fitzwilliam declared, pushing away from the stable wall and beginning to stride toward the house. “Did Bingley tell you that he would have arrived in Brighton earlier if he had not chosen to squire his sister to a museum? I like Bingley, certainly, but if he is going to continue to be dominated by his younger sister, I believe Miss Bennet is better off without him.”

Darcy frowned thoughtfully at this. It was true that Miss Bingley was tiresome and domineering, and both Bingley and Miss Bennet had gentle natures. Perhaps his cousin was right that the two were not especially well matched given that neither was willing to disappoint others, even when the others in question were being needlessly demanding.

“Oh, Richard?” Darcy said as they achieved the path which led to the front door.

“Yes?”

“Elizabeth and I are engaged to be married!”

## Chapter 20

Lady Amelia led the ladies into the drawing room after dinner with a sense of satisfaction. Mr. Bingley's arrival and subsequent departure had been startling, but to her relief Miss Bennet seemed entirely calm enough after meeting her erstwhile suitor again. Dinner had been rather humorous because Gabriel, caught up in all the excitement in Brighton, had failed to send word to his cook that a large party was arriving and would need food. When they had arrived at Beehaven, the cook was away helping her married daughter, who had just had her first child. Faced with genuine hunger, Lady Amelia had instructed her servants to kill two chickens and rolled up her sleeves. She had always enjoyed cooking and had often assisted with meals. Dinner had been simple, but all present had enjoyed baked chicken, a cucumber salad, and a quantity of bread, butter, and fresh honey. Lady Amelia could only be pleased with the responses of those who fell heartily to eating, and when the ladies rose from the table, both Miss Bennets waxed eloquent over the luscious flavor of the honey.

“I have a suggestion,” Lady Amelia said when the party had gathered in the drawing room an hour later.

The others looked at her curiously, and she in turn looked at Jane and Gabriel. “Given Darcy and Miss Elizabeth’s new engagement, you two young people have limited time to learn more about one another. May I suggest you speak of matters of importance to you, instead of wasting your time talking of the weather and the roads?”

Gabriel Hartford chuckled and said, “Mama, do you not know it is incumbent on a gentleman to confine himself to discussions of the weather and the beauty of his companion for at least two weeks before moving onto more serious topics?”

“If that is so, Mr. Hartford, you have already gone astray,” Elizabeth pointed out with mock severity. “You have already spoken extensively of bees, and I believe there cannot be a more important topic in all of creation.”

The gentleman grinned at the youngest lady in the room and nodded meekly. “You are entirely correct, Miss Elizabeth. I hope you can forgive me, Miss Bennet.”

“With all my heart,” Jane said, smiling

at Lady Amelia, “for I believe your mother is entirely right in the matter. Ladies and gentlemen often spend too many precious hours discussing matters of no real importance.”

“I am very willing to speak of serious matters,” Gabriel said.

She nodded and settled into a chair across from her suitor. Elizabeth and Darcy, by silent consent, shifted to the other end of the room, and Lady Amelia and Colonel Fitzwilliam took their places in the middle, the better to provide oversight to the two couples.

“I believe that in this unusual situation, the lady should go first,” Gabriel invited.

Jane took a deep breath and, with rare courage, leaned forward and asked, “Would you be willing to speak to me more about the war and your experiences in Europe, Mr. Hartford, and how they have affected your life?”

Gabriel stared at her in wonder and respect. The memories of the war were difficult, as were the events surrounding the loss of his arm, but those events had indeed shaped him into the man he was today. Most ladies had no desire to hear of battles and

pain, the loss of dear comrades, the fear that struck the heart of the bravest man when the cannons began firing.

“I would be glad to,” he said, his eyes suddenly faraway. “I was meant for the diplomatic service, you know, but I longed to join the army and my father was kind enough to buy me a commission...”

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“Elizabeth?”

“Yes, Fitzwilliam?”

“It was I who wrote to Bingley telling him that Miss Bennet truly cared for him last autumn. It was, it seems, too little and too late. I apologize.”

“Pray do not. Mr. Bingley made his choice back in December when he chose not to return to Netherfield. I can only trust that the Lord will guide Jane and Mr. Hartford; I would like to see my beloved elder sister well settled with an honorable man, but thanks to the extensive Darcy coffers, I at least have no fear of seeing my family starve.”

“Ah yes, I knew it; you are marrying me

for my money!”

Elizabeth laughed and teased, “Indeed I am, sir. Well, that, and your connections. You are the nephew of an earl, after all!”

“But Richard is the son of an earl, not a mere nephew.”

“But he did not ask me to marry him!” Elizabeth responded demurely and then reached out to take Darcy’s gloved hands in her own. “In truth, my dear love, I cannot think of another man in all of England who could capture my heart as you have. I hope you know how very fortunate I know myself to be.”

“It is I who am the blessed one,” Darcy responded, his voice choked with emotion. “Yesterday was one of the two happiest days of my life.”

“And what was the other?”

“The day Georgiana was born. My mother had miscarried at least three children before Georgie, and I was old enough to be very worried; my sister was born full term, and her indignant cries could be heard outside the birthing suite, where my father and I were pacing up and down in the corridor. It was one of the few times that I saw my father cry,



and they were tears of joy.”

“Do tell me of Miss Darcy, please.”

“You wish to speak of Georgiana?”

“Yes, for we will soon be sisters, and I want to be the best possible sister I can be.”

“I have no doubt you will be, Elizabeth, and certainly you have much experience being a good sister. Georgiana is a gentle, sweet, shy girl who is still recovering from her near disaster last year at Ramsgate. Your enthusiasm for life, your wit and intelligence, and your good nature will lift her spirits. I suppose it would be a good time to discuss her living arrangements. I hope that you are willing to have her live with us the majority of the time?”

“Oh, of course! I cannot imagine having her dwelling apart from us! Does she truly enjoy music?”

Darcy tilted his head in confusion at this. “She practices the pianoforte very diligently.”

“Yes, I remember that you said so when we were enjoying one another’s company at Rosings; I wondered if she truly relishes playing the instrument, or whether she practices so hard because it is expected of

young ladies of refinement.”

This rather set Darcy back on his metaphorical heels. Did Georgiana truly enjoy playing music? It was true that young ladies were encouraged to be greatly accomplished through playing music, singing, drawing, and designing tables. Was there any chance that his sweet sister felt chained to the pianoforte by societal expectations?

“I believe she does,” he said honestly, “but in truth I am not entirely confident. She is such a quiet young lady, you see. I hope she actually enjoys her music and is not merely toiling away to please me.”

“Do not worry, Mr. Darcy of Pemberley, I will plumb the depths of your sweet sister’s heart and discover if she really cares about her music or not. And if she does not, I will steal her pianoforte for myself.”

He smiled at this. “You need not steal Georgiana’s instrument, my love. I will buy you your own if you like.”

“How delightfully extravagant!”

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“I hope you approve of your cousin’s engagement, Colonel Fitzwilliam?” Lady Amelia asked, pouring tea for the man and handing it over.

“I feel an odd mixture of approval and envy, Lady Amelia. I met Miss Elizabeth in Kent when I was visiting Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and if she had been an heiress, I would have offered for her myself.”

Lady Amelia took a sip of her own tea and lifted a curious eyebrow. “You require an heiress, then?”

“I do, madam. I was born into a house and family of privilege and wealth, and while I do not believe myself to be particularly extravagant, I would not be comfortable living on only a few hundred pounds a year.”

“Am I to understand that your father made no provision for you?”

Colonel Fitzwilliam sighed and leaned back in his chair. “I do receive a yearly allowance, yes, but sadly my elder brother was a gamester in his younger years, and the family coffers suffered accordingly. He has settled down now, but there is not as much money as there might be.”

He shook himself suddenly and grimaced

ruefully. "I really ought not to be saying such things to you, Lady Amelia. The atmosphere in this room bears some similarity to a Catholic confessional, it seems."

"It is quite all right," the older lady assured him. "I was very close friends to your aunt, Lady Anne Darcy, and have followed your generation's exploits and lives with interest for many years. I am sorry about your brother, though not surprised; a great many fortunes have been lost on the gaming tables."

"They have, and I truly do not blame Gervase. I daresay this sounds peculiar, but I rather pity him in some ways. I was raised with the expectation that I would enter the army, and thus I had a plan for my life from an early age. Gervase was sent to Eton and then Cambridge and was caught up in gambling and other less than noble pursuits, and since my father still lives, he had no direction and no impetus to turn his mind to serious matters. It is a regrettable reality that he is marking time until my father passes on – not that he wishes for my father to die, but until he does, Gervase is left kicking his heels. When the earl does die, my brother will suddenly be required to take on all the responsibilities and burdens of the Matlock

estate. I hope for all our sakes that he is able to make the transition.”

“I understand completely! Indeed, that is why my husband Aaron purchased Beehaven; he wanted our elder son, Michael, to have his own estate to oversee while my husband still lived. When Aaron passed on too soon, Michael took over the administration of the Hartford estate in Kent, and Beehaven devolved to Gabriel in his father’s will.”

“Was Mr. Hartford in the army when your husband died?”

“Oh yes. He was committed to fighting against the French and thus a steward oversaw Beehaven, with some assistance from me. When Gabriel was so gravely injured, I was relieved that he had a place to call home, and this estate has proven a healing place for him. As an army man yourself, you are aware of the horrors of wars.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam glanced over at Jane and Hartford, who were gazing intently at one another. Miss Bennet was speaking in a low voice, her elegant hands gesturing, and he said, “Perhaps Mr. Hartford will soon have a lovely and loving wife to bring more comfort.”

His hostess glanced adoringly at her son

and said, "I dearly hope so, Colonel. I dearly hope so."

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Charles Bingley turned over for the twelfth time and groaned. It had to be at least one in the morning now, but the stable yard of the Yelverton Arms was still noisy at this hour.

For a moment, he regretted his belated decision to leave Hartford House in the late afternoon. He had intended to stay in Brighton one night, but when he walked through the main door of the mansion, he felt such a surge of anguish that he chose to hastily pack his bags and ride out of town to the nearest inn with an available room.

Not that the noise was entirely to blame for his wakefulness. In fact, the sounds of horses and yelling ostlers were of far less concern than the anguish in his own mind. He had been so excited, so hopeful, so foolish, when he arrived in Brighton only a day previously! He had assumed, without even thinking about it, that Miss Bennet would be waiting eagerly for him to renew his addresses.

Now, lying on a rather hard mattress, with a flat pillow under his head, in an overheated room, in a noisy inn, he wondered how he could have been so stupid. Jane Bennet was one of the loveliest, kindest, most gracious women in all of England. He had met her last autumn, openly pursued her, and then left without a word of farewell or explanation. Worse than that, Miss Bennet had been in Town for three months at the beginning of the current year, and Bingley's sister Caroline had treated her with rude disdain. No, it was no surprise that Miss Bennet no longer cared for him. Given his juvenile behavior, it was surprising that the lady (or more likely, Miss Elizabeth) had not slapped him in the face when he appeared uninvited at Beehaven.

There was an indignant shout outside his window – something about a horse – and Bingley decided, with a sigh, that it was unlikely that he would sleep tonight, not with so many things on his mind. He got up, staggered around in the darkness in search of a candle, lit it from a small lantern burning low on the mantelpiece of the unlit fireplace, and shrugged on his dressing gown.

His life, he thought cynically, lay in

ruins now, since the only woman he would ever love had turned her back on him. But he was only five and twenty years of age. If happiness was to be denied to him, he could at least do something useful in his life. For far too long, he had drifted along in the current of stronger personalities – Darcy, Caroline, his old friends at Cambridge, who had relished his open handedness with money and his easy going nature.

His mouth twisted wryly in the darkness. It occurred to him that he had every right to be angry at Darcy, and the very thought made him uncomfortable. Why was that? Why was he so ill at ease with being at odds with his fellow man? Why did he allow himself to be pushed here and there instead of standing up for what he truly desired? Why did he embrace the blame when others were at least partially at fault?

Back in December, when Darcy and Bingley's sisters had approached him regarding his love for Miss Bennet, it was Darcy's words which had finally convinced him that Jane...that Miss Bennet truly was not attached to him. Why had his friend intervened in such a way? He could have been married to her now, married and happy,



and instead...

He blew out a slow breath and struggled to think clearly. He had no doubt that Darcy was genuinely regretful over his contribution to the failure of his friend's pursuit of Miss Bennet. But, Bingley realized grimly, he had invited Darcy's interference in his life. Ever since the two men had been in Cambridge, Darcy had led and Bingley had followed. Even when Bingley had leased Netherfield, he had done so only when he knew Darcy could visit and help him learn the ropes of estate management. In word and deed, Bingley had shown himself dependent on his older friend to steer him in life. Was it any surprise that Darcy felt he had the right to intrude on his friend's romantic entanglements, especially when the family of his love had mediocre connections and little wealth?

He laughed bitterly; it was incredibly ironic, of course, that Darcy had fallen in love with the second daughter of the same family. Ironic and exquisitely painful.

He was angry at Darcy, yes, and he was angry at his sisters, but most of all, he was angry at himself.

A snatch of Scripture suddenly came to

mind, one that he had heard at church only the previous Sunday.

*When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.*

It was time for him to put away childish things and become a man, to take responsibility for his life, to discover his purpose, to set his hand to the plow.

It was time for him to grow up.

## Chapter 21

Elizabeth opened her eyes, aware of a deep sense of satisfaction. This morning, at least, she remembered where she was – at Beehaven, with Jane sleeping peacefully beside her, with Mr. Darcy, the man she had fallen in love with and promised to marry, in the other wing of the house.

“You look so very happy, Lizzy,” Jane’s soft voice murmured, and Elizabeth turned with surprise to observe her elder sister curled up on the window seat, the early morning sun making a halo of her golden hair.

“You are awake early, Jane!”

“I am. I have a great deal on my mind and woke up uncommonly early, for me at any rate.”

Elizabeth hopped out of bed and hurried over to wrap a comforting arm around her sister. “Did Mr. Bingley’s unexpected arrival distress you?”

“Mr. Bingley? No, not particularly. I confess that I am flummoxed and rather annoyed at his appearance after so many months without word but no, I am thinking

more of Mr. Hartford.”

“And what do you think of Mr. Hartford, Jane?”

The eldest Bennet daughter bit her lip thoughtfully and then said, “I like him very much, Lizzy, very much indeed. However, our discussion last night was ... difficult.”

“Difficult? In what way, my dear?”

Jane turned her clear eyed gaze on her sister and reached forward to grasp Elizabeth’s slender hands in her own. “Lizzy, the things he has endured are quite beyond my capacity to imagine. His wound, the loss of his arm – that would be enough to devastate many a man, but he endured so much more. Close friends died, Elizabeth, at Corunna. He says he still has terrible dreams at times.”

“I can well understand that, Jane, but I quite see what you mean. He might not be an entirely comfortable husband if he is prone to nightmares.”

Jane blushed at the thought of sharing a bed with a man, but she lifted her chin determinedly and declared, “If I feel God’s leading to marry Mr. Hartford, then I will not allow fear to sway me.”

“Of course you will not, my dear, noble

Jane. But I do urge you not to get ahead of yourself too much. You and Mr. Hartford have not yet known each other a week!"

"That is true, but I feel as if I know him far better than I ever knew Mr. Bingley. I know that sounds very peculiar, but last night he and I spoke of very serious matters, and he shared his heart and I shared mine. Mr. Bingley and I enjoyed one another's company very much, but I think perhaps he is a shallow man in some ways. I do not blame him for that; he has, in many ways, had a very easy life. Mr. Hartford has had a difficult life, and his war experience and his injuries have stamped his soul with a gravitas that is quite missing in Mr. Bingley."

"My Fitzwilliam is quite a serious man," Elizabeth mused, "and he has never been to war."

"I suspect Mr. Darcy was born with an earnest nature, but do keep in mind, Elizabeth, that your beloved took the reins of Pemberley into his hands at three and twenty, plus the oversight and care of a much younger sister, and has thus carried a heavy burden from a young age."

"That is true. Well, Jane, I will pray for

God's guidance for both you and Mr. Hartford. I would love to see you as happy as I am."

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Mr. Bennet was working on the Longbourn estate accounts when the door to the library flew open and his wife stormed in, her face flushed with outrage.

"What is this I hear, Mr. Bennet? Kitty tells me that you informed her this morning that she is not permitted to go to the assembly in Meryton tomorrow night!"

Her husband carefully put down his pen and folded his hands. "That is correct, Mrs. Bennet. Neither Lydia nor Kitty are to be considered out in society from this time forward."

"What nonsense!" Mrs. Bennet screeched. "I understand that Lydia must not show her face until that dreadful bruise has faded, but Kitty must go to the Meryton assembly!"

"She is not attending the assembly," her husband declared, "and I assure you that

nothing you say will change my mind in this matter. Lydia's idiotic pursuit of Wickham could have been disastrous to our family, though by the grace of God, she is safe. Our younger girls have been running wild for years, which is my fault, but I am resolved to change my ways and guide them appropriately. I promise you that I have no intention of giving either Kitty or Lydia a chance of ruining their sisters' reputations!"

"How are our girls to find husbands if they never go anywhere?" his lady demanded, tears of fear and fury spilling out of her eyes. "It is most unreasonable of you since that dreadful Mr. Collins will inherit Longbourn when you die! You have no compassion on my nerves!"

Mr. Bennet forced himself to take a deep breath, and then another, as he struggled to calm himself. He was, he knew, entirely to blame that his younger girls were such flighty fools. He had disregarded his responsibilities as husband and father, and all his children would be ruined now if not for the timely interference of Elizabeth and the Gardiners.

For a moment, he allowed himself to mourn the departure of the Gardiners and their children for London the previous day; he

knew that Mrs. Gardiner excelled in calming down his silly wife. However, he had been holding one piece of information in reserve, and now it was time to use it.

“Fanny,” he said, reaching forward and taking his wife’s hand in his own. “Please, do sit down.”

“What is it, Mr. Bennet?” she asked, quite taken aback by the gentle touch from her usually sardonic husband. She obediently sat down on a chair near him and peered at him in confusion.

“I did not tell you this before, my dear, and I do beg of you not to spread it among our neighbors, but our Lizzy is being pursued by a man of wealth and connection in Brighton. I assure you that it more important that Kitty and Lydia stay quietly at home at this juncture, as the gentleman in question has noble relatives, all of whom are rather fussy about the reputation of women who marry into the family.”

“A wealthy gentleman for Lizzy? You must be joking, Mr. Bennet!”

“Not at all, I assure you! I saw them together, and unless I am very much mistaken, he is more than half in love with her already.”



“Is he truly wealthy? Truly?”

“Oh yes, my dear. In fact, I have heard rumors that his income is some ten thousand pounds per annum.”

“Oh, Husband, if Lizzy could capture such a man, we would all be saved! And even if he tires of her, Jane is there as well; this gentleman might well transfer his affections to her, now that Mr. Bingley is coming no more to Netherfield. Very well, I will tell Kitty that she will not be able to go the assembly. For such an important cause as a marriage for her elder sister, she can be disappointed for a little while.”

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“I cannot believe that I am not to go to the assembly!” Kitty whined, pacing back and forth in her bedroom. “It is not fair! First you were permitted to go to Brighton, and then Elizabeth and Jane went to Brighton, and I have been stuck here, bored and lonely, and now Father will not even let me go to the assembly!”

Lydia, who was curled up on her sister’s bed, lifted her head and said wearily, “Oh, do

stop carrying on, Kitty. Father is not going to change his mind.”

“Why do you say that?” her next older sister demanded. “He always has changed his mind, when Mama and you and I teased him. Why should this time be any different?”

Lydia sat up and, for the thirtieth time that day, touched her bruised face. It still hurt. “It is different because...”

She trailed off and slumped back down onto the mattress, before saying dully, “It is different, Kitty. After what happened in Brighton – well, it is different.”

“*Why?* Lydia, I *insist* you tell me what happened in Brighton! The last I knew, you were in love with Mr. Wickham and were going to marry him, and Father raced off to stop you, and then you returned to Longbourn with a terribly bruised face, and all that Father would say is that you fell and hit your head! Perhaps that is explanation enough for Mama, but it is not for me. I promise you I will start *screaming* if you do not explain what truly happened.”

Lydia stared blankly at the wall for another minute and then sat up abruptly to glare into her sister’s face. “Very well, Kitty,

you wish to know what happened in Brighton? I will tell you, though you must promise on your honor to not tell Mama. I cannot bear her crying and wailing, do you understand?"

"I swear I will not tell her," Kitty said eagerly, plumping down all too eagerly on the mattress next to Lydia.

"I did pledge to marry Wickham, but then I met another man, a colonel in the Regulars, the son of an earl, and he promised to introduce me to the Prince Regent himself. I told Wickham that I would run away with him to Gretna Green but that I needed to wait a few days, that was all, a few days, so that I could meet the Prince! He pretended to agree, and then when I crept out the next morning to walk the Promenade Grove with him, he tricked me into entering a carriage and tried to abduct me! When I cried out for help, he struck me! That is what happened, Kitty. The man I thought was the best gentleman in the world tried to kidnap me and ... and ... he would have ... he would have..."

She turned away and buried her face in her pillow, her shoulders shaking. Kitty stared at her usually brash younger sister with dismay – Mr. Wickham, a villain? Her sister

Lydia, crying in distress?

“It sounds quite dreadful, Lydia,” she murmured, patting her sister’s back clumsily. “I am so very sorry. I thought Mr. Wickham was such a gentleman.”

“So did I,” Lydia sobbed, “but he was a blackguard. Oh Kitty, he looked at me with such loathing and disgust! I was just a plaything to him. It was horrible. I have never been so frightened in my life. I hate him!”

“However did you get away?”

Lydia sat up again and wiped her face with her handkerchief and said “Lizzy knew Mr. Wickham was a bad man, and she and our aunt and uncle went to Brighton to protect me. Somehow Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam – the son of the earl I was telling you about – were involved as well. They rescued me within a minute of Wickham hitting me, but that was the most terrifying minute of my life, Kitty.”

“Mr. Darcy? Mr. Bingley’s friend?”

“Yes.”

“How very odd! How could he possibly have become involved in this affair? I mean, he despises Lizzy and even insulted her upon

their first meeting.”

“I do not know, Kitty, but I am truly grateful that he and the colonel ... oh, I hear Mama coming! Remember, not a word to her about any of this!”

“I promise,” her sister said fervently as her bedroom door opened and Mrs. Bennet stormed in with Mary at her heels. The lady of the house cast a cursory glance at Lydia, who had leaped up and was carefully washing her face with the water pitcher on the dresser, and turned to Kitty.

“Kitty, I am so glad you are here! Show me your dresses, my dear. Mary needs a dress for tomorrow’s assembly, and there is no time, of course, for a new one to be made up. But you and Mary are quite similar in size, and Sally can make any minor adjustments before tomorrow.”

“That is not fair, Mama!” Kitty exclaimed. “They are my dresses, not Mary’s!”

“Mama, I truly do not need a new dress, and especially not one of Kitty’s,” Mary protested.

“Nonsense, my dear. Jane and Elizabeth are in Brighton, and your father is absolutely determined that Kitty and Lydia will not

attend tomorrow's assembly. It is imperative that at least one of you attend; I understand that the Porters' son has returned from abroad, and he has at least a thousand pounds a year. You are regrettably plain, Mary, but we must make a push to at least *try* and find you a husband."

Mary flushed miserably at this, and Lydia, strangely stirred, turned around to say, "Mary, I think that Kitty's blue dress would bring out the blue in your eyes, and I do think your hair would benefit from curling with tongs."

"It is my dress!" Kitty yelled indignantly.

"You can have my yellow one, Kitty," Lydia promised. "Sally can work on fitting it for you after Mary is prepared for the assembly."

Mrs. Bennet stared in surprise at her youngest, but was quick to agree. "Yes, Kitty, that is fair, is it not?"

"I suppose," Kitty grumbled. She did adore Lydia's yellow dress.

Lydia, relishing the opportunity to turn her thoughts in another direction, fetched the blue gown from the closet and said, "Mama,

do send for Sally now, will you not? We need to begin working right away!”

## Chapter 22

“What do you think of Beehaven and her lands?” Elizabeth asked Darcy as they wandered happily among the butterflies and bees behind the house.

“The estate is both well maintained and administered,” Darcy said, smiling down at her. “Mr. Hartford is obviously a diligent master, as well as a sensible and intelligent one.”

“It is obvious that his retainers respect and approve of him,” Elizabeth mused. “I believe that the praise of an intelligent servant is high praise indeed, as they see their master when he is not putting on a show for those of similar rank.”

“My darling Elizabeth, if I had only known that you hold that view, I would have invited you to Pemberley months ago! Dear Mrs. Reynolds, who is our housekeeper, always boasts about me to all and sundry. She is, I fear, inclined to look upon me too warmly; she has overseen the house since I was a small boy.”

“On the contrary, if she thought well of



you from a young age, that is high praise indeed! I fear I was a rather difficult child myself, prone to falling out of trees and dirtying my dresses. My mother found me quite a trial at times.”

“Do you remember when you walked three miles to Netherfield last autumn after Miss Bennet fell ill while visiting Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley?”

“Of course! I arrived with muddy petticoats and my hair in disarray. Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley were horrified, and I do not think you were particularly impressed either, dear sir!”

“I was rather taken aback at your marching across country alone, but your eyes were even more lovely than usual after such exercise. As for your hair, I have no memory of anything untoward...”

Darcy trailed off, his eyes fixed on his love’s fine eyes. “Elizabeth?”

“Yes?”

“Would you object to a short engagement?”

Elizabeth moved a little closer. “Not at all, my darling Fitzwilliam.”

/

“Is your sister always so vigorous?” Gabriel Hartford inquired. He and Jane had retreated to ‘their’ bench underneath the oak tree, and he watched respectfully as Elizabeth and Darcy continued wandering the paths under the hot sun.

“Oh yes! Elizabeth has always been a great walker with tremendous stamina. When we were children, she would climb fences and trees and run up and down hills, as well and as swiftly as any of the local boys. She is also very intelligent; I am not surprised that Mr. Darcy fell in love with her. She is, I truly believe, the most remarkable Bennet sister of us all.”

Gabriel turned to look on his companion with considerable surprise. Surely, Miss Bennet was engaging in false modesty, but no, the lady’s expression was both genuine and fond.

“I admire Miss Elizabeth very much, but I prefer you.”

“Because I am handsome?” Jane asked with a hint of exasperation.

“No!” the gentleman protested. Jane lifted her eyebrows in mocking reproof and he continued hastily. “You are, of course, very beautiful, Miss Bennet, but it is your ... your serenity that I find so attractive.”

“My serenity?” Jane asked in some surprise.

“Yes,” Gabriel said, turning to gaze at a distant bank of dark clouds. A moment later, a bee buzzed by, and he followed its flight with his eyes until it landed on a nearby stand of goldenrod. “Your uncle described Miss Elizabeth as quicksilver and fire, and you as placid and serene. I do not know Darcy well, but I think he relishes a woman who is able to challenge him intellectually and personally. I am no scholar, and I need a peaceable companion to share my life. You have an air of calm about you, Miss Bennet, that I find enormously attractive.”

Jane reached out an impulsive hand to touch Gabriel’s arm. “I understand, Mr. Hartford. I believe that you deserve peace and quiet after your trials.”

/

“Charles, where have you been?” Caroline Bingley demanded, erupting into Bingley’s office like a swarm of particularly ill-tempered hornets. “I wished for you to escort me when I called on Lady Northmore yesterday morning, only to learn that you had crept out of town without telling me where you were going!”

Charles Bingley had returned to London mid-morning, but since his sleep had been much disturbed the previous night, he had promptly taken a nap. When he had awoken, much refreshed, he was pleased to realize that his resolve from the previous night was still at the forefront of his mind. He was determined to make significant changes in his life, starting with his relationship with his younger sister, and thus had repaired to his office to refresh his memory regarding the details of his sister’s dowry.

“Sit down, Caroline,” he ordered coldly, setting down his pen and regarding the younger woman with hard eyes.

To her astonishment, Miss Bingley found herself obeying. She was not in the habit of taking direction from her brother, but he had an odd look on his face.

“I was in Brighton, visiting Darcy,” Bingley explained calmly, though his posture was rigid.

“Mr. Darcy is in Brighton! Whatever is he doing there? But it matters not; you should have told me, and I would have come with you!”

“You were not invited, nor did I stay even a night. I went in hopes of renewing my courtship of Miss Bennet.”

His sister gaped for a moment and then cried out, “Jane Bennet? What can you be thinking, Charles! She did not care for you last year, and she certainly does not care about you now!”

“She did care for me,” her brother responded, slamming his fist on the desk, causing Caroline to jump in astonishment. He leaned forward a little, his eyes boring into her own. “She did care for me. Darcy told me that he was quite mistaken in the matter, and she was heartbroken when I did not return to Netherfield as I promised. But you are correct that she is no longer attached to me in any way; I found her in Brighton being courted by another man.”

The lady relaxed in open relief. “Well,

then, there is no reason to even consider her further, is there? I must say too that Mr. Darcy, who is wise in so many ways, is hardly as familiar with the inclination of women as I am myself. I am quite certain that Jane did not care for you at all, but merely pursued you in hopes of securing a wealthy gentleman. If she truly loved you less than a year ago, she would hardly be in a courtship with another man now, would she?”

Her brother stared at her with disgust. “I met Miss Bennet last October, pursued her, openly courted her, danced with her three times at the ball at Netherfield, then left without a word of farewell and never returned, despite my promise to do so. I am the one at fault, Caroline, for letting you, Louisa, and Darcy lead me around by the nose like a donkey. I have no doubt Miss Bennet was subjected to whispers and gossip – my dancing with her so many times at the ball was tantamount to a proposal! If she disdains me now, I cannot blame her in the least!”

Caroline sighed and said, “Be that as it may, your friendship with the Bennets is entirely over now. So...”

“So I am returning to Netherfield tomorrow morning,” he interrupted coldly.

“You and the Hursts may stay here if you wish.”

“What? You cannot be serious!”

“I am entirely serious, Caroline. I spent most of last night awake, considering my actions of the last few years. I have always been a friendly, easy going man, which served me well throughout my years of education when I rubbed shoulder with gentlemen from landed families. But there is such a thing as being too carefree. I have drifted here and there as my whimsy, or more accurately, your ambition, has taken me. I took Netherfield for the purpose of learning to manage an estate, and instead spent most of my time pursuing Miss Bennet and sitting around languidly. I intend to return to the estate and set my hand to the plow, so to speak. I intend to visit my man of business this afternoon and will have your dowry turned over to you; I will no longer pay for your extravagances, Caroline.”

“Charles, no!” his sister exclaimed and then, quailing at the anger in his eyes, said gently. “Charles, do please consider; if you go back to Netherfield, Mrs. Bennet will merely throw another of her tiresome girls at your head. I am certain Miss Elizabeth would be delighted to marry the master of Netherfield.”

Bingley rose to his feet and looked down at her with contempt. "You are wrong; Miss Elizabeth is already engaged to be married."

The lady heaved out a sigh of relief. She at least liked Jane Bennet, though she did not wish to have her as a sister. Miss Elizabeth, full of conceit and impertinence, would be entirely intolerable. "Is she indeed? Whom is she marrying?"

Bingley leaned forward and smiled unpleasantly. "She is marrying Darcy!"

/

"Oh excellent shot, Mr. Hartford!" Elizabeth cried out gaily. The party had returned to Brighton the previous afternoon, and she was relishing the cool wind blowing from the endless blue waters behind Hartford House.

"Really, Gabriel, that is ridiculous," Lady Amelia pouted comically. "How is it that you are far better at lawn billiards with one arm than I am with two?"

"It is all in the wrist, dear Mother," Gabriel answered with a grin. "I believe it is



your turn, Miss Bennet?"

Jane eyed the ball with considerable misgiving and said, "I am quite certain that I will make a botch of it. Do you have any suggestions?"

Gabriel moved a little closer to her. "I find it best to aim, not for the ring itself, but for a point partway toward the ring. It is too far to reach in one hit, of course."

Elizabeth, who was standing aside awaiting her term, watched fondly as Jane, her brow scrunched with concentration, solemnly swung her mallet and hit the ball, which proceeded to roll directly toward the ring at the far end of the court. It did not reach very far, but the aim was true.

"Oh, very good, Jane!" she exclaimed and then looked at Darcy who was, as usual, looking at her. "And how are you, sir, at lawn billiards?"

"I fear that while my swing is powerful, my aim is often poor. Georgiana is far better than I am. Do you have much experience, Elizabeth?"

"No, for Longbourn does not have a court. But I assume Pemberley does, and I shall endeavor to give your sister a good game

within the year.”

“If you put your mind to it, I have no doubt at all that you will succeed.”

She smiled up at him and said, “I do not believe I have ever been so happy as I am now, Fitzwilliam.”

“I know that I have never been more delighted with life, my love.”

“Your turn, Mr. Darcy,” Lady Amelia called out.

## Chapter 23

“Mr. Bingley!” Sir William Lucas enthused, surging forward with his hand held out. “Well, this is an unexpected pleasure! I had no idea that you had returned to Netherfield, sir!”

“I arrived only this morning, Sir William,” Bingley explained, shaking the man’s hand. “My housekeeper told me that there was an assembly in Meryton tonight, and I could only rejoice at the opportunity to renew my acquaintance with many of my old neighbors.”

“Oh, Mr. Bingley,” Lady Lucas exclaimed, bustling up with her daughter Maria. “Oh, how delightful to see you again!”

“Mr. Bingley returned only this morning,” her husband informed her jovially. “We are very pleased to see you, sir, very pleased indeed!”

“I am delighted to be here,” Bingley said and turned to Maria. “Miss Lucas, might I have this dance?”

“Thank you, sir,” Maria responded shyly. Together, the couple walked out onto

the dance floor, causing Lady Lucas to squeal in delight. “Sir William, how wonderful that Mr. Bingley has returned, and at such an opportune time!”

“In what way is it particularly opportune?”

“Why, Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth are away, and I heard from Mrs. Long that Miss Lydia, while she has returned from Brighton, is unwell. I daresay we will have only Miss Mary and Miss Kitty in attendance tonight, and they may not come at all if there is illness at Longbourn. What a fine thing for Maria! Oh, if she could capture Mr. Bingley, I would have nothing more to wish for!”

Her husband, while he might deprecate his lady’s strident tones, could not but be struck with the truth of her words. “Why, you are entirely correct, my dear, we are fortunate indeed! I believe our Maria is the prettiest woman in attendance right now, and Mr. Bingley has long had an eye for handsome ladies.”

Fifteen minutes later, a thoroughly ruffled Mrs. Bennet hurried into the assembly with an unhappy Mary trailing behind her. Lady Lucas, rendered enthusiastic at the sight

of only one Bennet daughter, and the plainest one at that, hurried up to her friend and rival and inquired, "How are you, Mrs. Bennet and Miss Mary?"

"We would be better if we had arrived on time," Mrs. Bennet said irritably. "Lydia insisted on curling Mary's hair and it took a very long time."

By this time, Lady Lucas had assimilated the appearance of Miss Mary, and felt her heart sink. The girl might not be as beautiful as her sisters, but she actually looked remarkably attractive. "Mary, is that a new dress?"

"Er, yes, that is," Mary began nervously.

"Yes it is," Mrs. Bennet finished, "and Lydia is correct, the color does bring out the blue in Mary's eyes. Indeed, she looks quite well. Is Mr. Porter here, Lady Lucas?"

"Mr. Porter? No, he is not, but Mr. Bingley is!"

"Mr. Bingley? Oh, Lady Lucas, you must be teasing ... oh, Mary, oh, it is Mr. Bingley! What dreadful luck that Jane is in Brighton! How long has Mr. Bingley been back at Netherfield, do you know?"

"He only arrived this morning and

rushed here immediately this evening to spend time with his old acquaintances. It is such a pity that four of your girls are not here tonight, Mrs. Bennet.”

“It is,” Mrs. Bennet agreed mournfully and said, “Now Mary, if Mr. Bingley asks you to dance, be certain to tell him that Jane is in Brighton but will be home soon. Oh, your father *must* recall her at once! I do not care if Lizzy is being courted by a thousand gentlemen, Jane must return!”

Mary, caught between embarrassment and confusion, was entirely taken aback when Mr. Bingley and Maria appeared at her elbow.

“Oh Mary!” Maria gushed enthusiastically. “How well you look tonight.”

“Thank you,” Mary said uncomfortably.

“Miss Mary, might I have the honor of the dance after this one?” Mr. Bingley asked genially.

“Of course, Mr. Bingley.”

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The sun had crept behind the distant horizon and the first evening stars were

shining in the night sky. The windows of the drawing room at Hartford House were open, and Lady Amelia, leaning back in her favorite chair, enjoyed the chirping of crickets, the croaking of frogs, and the scent of roses riding inside on the cool evening breezes.

Mr. Darcy and Miss Elizabeth had, as usual, taken their places near one another at one end of the room; on the other end, Gabriel was paying court to Miss Bennet. Lady Amelia herself was without a conversational partner, as Colonel Fitzwilliam had gone out this evening to consult with the military authorities regarding the execution of George Wickham. She did not mind; she was grateful that she had been able to assist in rescuing Lydia Bennet and was thoroughly enjoying the romances playing out before her interested eyes, but she was tired. All of this dashing to and fro was quite outside her usual experience!

“Miss Bennet?” Gabriel asked softly, his eyes fixed on the lady’s winsome countenance.

“Yes?”

“We have spent a few days together now. I wished to say that ... that if any time you wish to discontinue our courtship, you

need only to speak. I mean, I would not wish to opportune you.”

“Mr. Hartford,” Jane said firmly. “I am thoroughly enjoying our courtship, I promise you.”

/

“It is delightful to see you again, Miss Bennet,” Mr. Bingley said, moving gracefully down the line of dancers across from his partner.

“Thank you, Mr. Bingley,” Mary returned uncomfortably. She was not used to being asked to dance, and especially not by a truly eligible gentleman. Of course, her more handsome sisters were not present tonight, and Mr. Bingley had been pursuing Jane last autumn. He probably wished to hear about *that* Bennet sister.

“My sisters Jane and Elizabeth are visiting friends in Brighton,” Mary volunteered.

“I know they are,” Bingley responded, keeping his smile firmly in place. “I was in Brighton only two days ago, and I met both



Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth there.”

“Truly? I had no idea!”

To Mary’s relief, the movement of the dance separated them, and when they came back together, Bingley introduced a new topic of conversation. “I regret that I have been absent from Netherfield for many months, but I intend to settle here until at least Christmas and will be working with my steward, Mr. Ayles, to ensure that the tenants are well.”

Mary said, “I know of one family that is *not* doing well, sir; the Audleys, who work one of the Netherfield tenant farms along the southern border of Longbourn, have had a wretched summer. Mr. Audley was kicked by a cow and broke his leg six weeks ago, and thus has been unable to do much work. His sons, who are fifteen and thirteen, are doing their best, but they are behind on the farm work, and it will be impossible for them to bring in all the harvest. Mrs. Audley is expecting another baby, which means she is not feeling entirely well either.”

Bingley gazed at his partner in surprise. “How do you know all this, Miss Mary?”

“I have visited them several times, sir, to bring them baskets of food.”

“That is very kind of you.”

“It is my duty as a Christian.”

“Yes, of course,” Bingley responded, even as he mourned inwardly. While he had been carelessly amusing himself these last months, his neighbors had been forced to care for his own tenants. “Do you have a suggestion as to how we can assist the Audleys in bringing in their harvest?”

Mary smiled at this, and Bingley noted with some astonishment that the combination of a cheerful expression, a new hairstyle, and an attractive dress, had rendered the ‘plain’ Miss Bennet quite attractive.

“Money is always welcome, sir, and the Simpsons, who are our tenants, have been blessed with a family of strapping sons. I am confident that you could pay the Simpsons to assist the Audleys.”

“That sounds like an excellent plan, Miss Mary.”

/

“Elizabeth?” Darcy asked.

“Yes?” Elizabeth replied, squinting up

into her beloved's face. The couple was walking along the beach and while she relished the sound of waves, the smell of salt, and the sight of the unending deep, the sun was rather too bright in her eyes.

“Mr. Hartford and I spoke last night. I am eager to speak to your father and ask for his blessing on our engagement, and Hartford gave careful instructions to his steward and servants at Beehaven during our sojourn there; thus, he is able to follow us to Meryton to continue his courtship of your sister while his retainers oversee his estate.”

“Where will you stay?” Elizabeth asked worriedly.

“There is a decent inn in Meryton, I believe?”

“There is, but it seems a pity that you must stay at an inn. However, Netherfield is obviously not a possibility with Mr. Bingley not in residence – perhaps you could stay at Lucas Lodge.”

“Mr. Hartford and I are quite indifferent as to living arrangements, my love. Keep in mind that he is a former soldier and accustomed to living in tents on occasion, and I love you so much that I would gladly sleep in

a ditch so long as I was near you.”

“The Pig in the Poke is far better than a ditch, my dearest love,” Elizabeth said with amusement, and then she turned to stare out over the open waters, which were rougher than usual. “I relish returning home and beginning arrangements for our wedding, but I will miss the ocean. It is wild and free, immense and extraordinary.”

“I would be delighted to take you wherever you wish to go on our honeymoon, Elizabeth. There are many pleasant seaside towns.”

“Oh no, my darling, more than anything I wish to see Pemberley! Unless, that is, you would prefer to go somewhere else.”

Darcy looked down adoringly. “No, Elizabeth, I can think of nothing better than beginning our new life together at Pemberley.”

/

“I do hope you will find the Pig in the Poke comfortable, Mr. Hartford,” Jane fretted as she and Gabriel, chaperoned by Lady Amelia and Colonel Fitzwilliam, strolled along

the brick pavement of Steyne Park.

Gabriel said, "Firstly, Miss Bennet, I would gladly sleep in a hovel with a leaking roof in order to continue our courtship. Secondly, I have lived in crude quarters as part of my military duties. I am certain that the colonel will agree with me that a pleasant English inn is heaven compared to some of the billets in Spain."

"What did you say?" the colonel inquired, having lost track of the conversation.

Gabriel repeated himself patiently, and Colonel Fitzwilliam laughed. "Oh yes, Miss Bennet, I assure you that English inns are indeed paradise compared to a frozen tent on a battlefield. But come, I see Prinny on horseback and he is moving this way, so prepare yourself for an introduction."

Jane flinched and looked anxiously down the green, noting the approach of a group of horsemen led by a corpulent gentleman of some fifty years. Lady Amelia placed a reassuring hand on her arm and guided her into a position which allowed the Prince and his retinue to pass by with ease.

Jane hoped that His Royal Highness, the Prince Regent of England, would merely ride

by, but it was not to be. The Prince, having spied the party, halted his horse next to the group. The ladies curtsied deeply to the de facto ruler of England while the gentlemen bowed appropriately.

The Prince waited for the formalities to be completed and then said jovially, “Mr. Hartford, Colonel Fitzwilliam, I did not know you gentlemen were acquainted!”

“Our friendship is a new one, sir,” Fitzwilliam declared, “but most pleasant. I hope you are well, your Highness?”

“I am well indeed!” the man responded, his fleshy face brightening at the sight of Jane. “I know Lady Amelia, of course, but am not acquainted with your other companion. Will you not introduce me?”

“Of course,” the son of the earl said calmly. “Your Royal Highness, Miss Bennet of Hertfordshire.”

Jane curtsied again deeply and when she stood up again, she observed with embarrassment that the Prince’s eyes were fixed intently on her face.

“Charming!” he declared. “Utterly charming. Lady Amelia, is Miss Bennet staying with you at Hartford House?”

“Yes, your Highness.”

“I will send an invitation along for a party at the Pavilion one of these days.”

“Thank you, your Highness.”

One of the prince’s courtiers murmured something softly into his liege’s ear, and the prince sighed. After a courteous nod to his subjects, he urged his horse onward. The entire retinue was soon far enough away that Jane could safely speak without being overheard.

“What does that mean?” she asked anxiously. “Must we wait in Brighton so that we can attend the Prince at the Pavilion?”

“No, my dear, there is no need,” Lady Amelia said with another reassuring pat of the girl’s arm. “If he had ordered us to the Pavilion tonight or tomorrow night, we would have been required to go. But a vague invitation is of no concern. I do believe we should depart for Hertfordshire soon, however; the Prince has an eye for beautiful young ladies, and he may stir himself to send a more specific invitation soon.”

## Chapter 24

“Mr. Bingley, Madam.”

Mrs. Bennet, who had been drowsing on the couch in the Longbourn parlor, leaped to her feet with a mixture of dismay and delight. Dismay because her husband still refused to call Jane home, but delight that Mr. Bingley was still interested in the Bennet family. Maybe Kitty would do for him if Jane stayed stubbornly away?

“Good morning, Mr. Bingley,” she exclaimed. “I hope you are well?”

“I am very well, Mrs. Bennet. I was hoping that I could speak to Mr. Bennet?”

The lady’s rather shallow brain whirled at this. Why would he wish to speak to Mr. Bennet? Was he wishing to speak about Jane and his pursuit of her? It could not be Mary, of course.

“Yes, of course, of course, Mr. Bingley! Do come this way. Mr. Bennet is in the library!”



“Mr. Bingley,” Bennet said, lifting his eyebrows curiously. “Please do sit down. I am honored by your visit. I understand from my wife that you only returned to Netherfield yesterday?”

“That is correct, sir,” Bingley answered, taking the chair across from the desk.

“I fear you find our family circle much diminished as my daughters Jane and Elizabeth are currently in Brighton visiting friends.”

“I am aware of that, Mr. Bennet. I was in Brighton only three days ago and met both Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth there.”

The older man, who had been in the act of pouring brandy for his guest, halted in surprise. “Were you indeed? Excellent! How are Mr. Darcy and my Lizzy getting on?”

Bingley grimaced. It would be poor form to share the engagement before Miss Elizabeth’s father had been officially informed. “They, erm, are getting along very well, sir,” he prevaricated.

Bennet tilted his head, his eyes narrowed and murmured, “So Darcy actually proposed, did he? I confess to amazement; my daughter

Elizabeth is a prize, but the gentleman has not always appreciated her beauty and wit.”

“I did not say that they were engaged,” Bingley said hastily.

“I can read it in your open, honest countenance. But I apologize for embarrassing you. Since you know that my Jane is in Brighton, I presume you are not here with the intention of pursuing her further?”

The younger man gulped and lifted a hand to loosen his collar. “In truth, I journeyed to Brighton with the intention of renewing our acquaintance, but Miss Bennet made it quite clear that any attachment between us is at an end.”

Bennet stared at his guest with surprised pleasure. Jane had always been far too inclined to excuse the poor behavior of her fellow man; it seemed that his eldest daughter was developing some discernment.

“Did she indeed? Well, I daresay she has reason enough for that decision, Mr. Bingley.”

“I assure you that I am well aware of my own culpability. I was a fool to abandon Netherfield last December. I listened to my friends and relations, who assured me ... well, it matters not what they said. I acted the boy

instead of the man, and have reaped the consequences. That is why I returned to Netherfield; I am determined to learn to manage the estate well. It was very poor form for me to be an absentee landlord for nearly a full year."

Bennet shrugged and took a sip of brandy. "The tenants are used to it; Netherfield sat empty for two years before you took the lease."

"But surely it would be better for them to have a diligent landlord?"

"It would, of course," Bennet agreed, aware of an uncomfortable stab of compunction. In addition to being an indolent father, he was a lazy overseer of Longbourn.

"Miss Mary informed me that one of my tenants, a Mr. Audley, broke his leg, and that his family is having difficulty managing the needs of their land."

"Mary told you this? When?"

"She informed me last night at the assembly when we danced together. She told me of a tenant family of yours, the Simpsons, blessed with strong sons, who might be willing to assist the Audleys if I paid them. I wished to consult with you as to whether that is

permissible, since you are the master of Longbourn.”

“Yes, that would be entirely acceptable. Mary is quite right; the Simpsons have six sons, and the four older ones are hardworking and strong. That is an excellent plan.”

“Thank you, Mr. Bennet. Can you direct me to their home?”

“It would be easier if you had a guide with you, and no doubt my daughter, Mary, would be pleased to introduce you to both the Simpsons and the Audleys.”

Bingley’s eyes grew rather wide at this and he said, uncomfortably, “I presume you or a servant will accompany us?”

“Yes,” his host replied a trifle haughtily. Unlike her younger sisters, Mary could be trusted to hold the line with gentlemen. A maid could accompany the couple.

Except, wait, after the near disaster at Brighton, he was determined to turn over a new leaf. He had already made changes in overseeing the actions of his younger two daughters, but that did not address his shortcomings as master of Longbourn.

He cast a piteous glance at a pile of new books and then smiled gamely at his guest. “I

will be accompanying you, of course, but Mary knows the Audleys better than I do.”

“Excellent!” Bingley answered, his good humor restored. “I am busy with my steward this afternoon, but perhaps we could drive out together tomorrow or the next day?”

“I believe we are free tomorrow morning, sir.”

/

“Elizabeth! Jane!”

“Aunt Gardiner!”

Elizabeth and Jane embraced their aunt heartily, and then both girls knelt down, the better to wrap their arms around their young cousins, who were cavorting about in the drawing room.

“Mr. Darcy, Mr. Hartford,” Mrs. Gardiner said warmly. “It is good to see you again.”

“It is delightful to see you as well, Mrs. Gardiner,” Gabriel answered with a slight bow. “I hope your journey back to London was a pleasant one?”

“It was pleasant enough, though I am all too ready to stay home for a time. We journeyed to Hertfordshire, you know, to collect our children from Longbourn, and after staying two days, returned to London. Our holiday proved both exciting and enjoyable, but it is always good to return home.”

“I agree with you entirely,” Darcy said fervently. “It has been too long since I have seen Pemberley, and I am looking forward to carrying Elizabeth there within a few weeks.”

This provoked a cry of delight from Mrs. Gardiner and Elizabeth, who had gently disengaged from her cousins, embraced her again and said, “We are to be married, Aunt! Is that not wonderful?”

“It is absolutely glorious! Congratulations, Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth. I believe you will suit one another very well!”

“I am certain you are correct,” Darcy answered, bending an adoring look on his beloved.

“We are to travel onward to Longbourn tomorrow, Aunt, but I hope that Jane and I can spend the night here? We fled Brighton in some haste, or we would have sent a message.”

“What were you fleeing from?” Mrs. Gardiner asked in concern.

Jane grimaced and Gabriel said, “We came across the Prince Regent on the Steyne, and he obviously admired Miss Bennet and spoke of inviting her to the Marine Pavilion for a party in the near future. As a gentleman’s daughter under our protection, she would come to no harm there, but of course Mr. Darcy and Miss Elizabeth are eager to seek Mr. Bennet’s blessing on their engagement.”

“I quite understand.”

/

“Kitty?”

Kitty Bennet, who had been preparing to go to bed, looked up at the open door to her bedchamber to observe Lydia standing in her nightgown. “Yes?”

“Kitty, would you mind terribly if I stayed with you tonight?”

The fourth Miss Bennet blinked but nodded. “Of course, do come in! But why? You have not wanted to share a bed since you

were ten years of age.”

Lydia’s eyes filled with tears and her head bowed. “I am having bad dreams.”

“Oh, Lydia, I am so sorry. Are they about what happened in Brighton?”

Lydia threw herself onto the bed and nodded miserably. “Yes, I keep having nightmares of being in that carriage, and Wickham hitting me, but then the carriage keeps going, and going, and he looks at me with such hatred and disgust, and I know he intends to ... to...”

She shivered and continued, “When I wake up, I am quite terrified. I know if you are with me when I awake, I will be comforted.”

“I understand,” Kitty said with genuine sympathy. “The bed is big enough for both of us, but do try not to put your cold feet on my legs!”

“Oh, and why not?” Lydia returned with a hint of her old spirit. “You always have such warm legs, and I have such cold feet!”

Kitty laughed and pulled back the covers, allowing both girls to crawl under the sheet.



For a few minutes all was silence, and then Lydia whispered, "Kitty, I have been thinking about Mary."

"What about Mary?"

"You know that Mama is always saying she is plain. I think that she would not be so very plain if she dressed her hair differently and if she wore clothes that better suited her coloring."

Kitty turned over to face her sister, whose countenance was barely visible in the moonlit room. "Do you believe Mary truly wishes to be pretty?"

"Why ever would she wish to be ugly, Kitty?"

"Mary is always talking about the Bible, and how it says that a woman's beauty should not come from outward adornment. I am not certain that she cares about her lack of beauty."

"I suspect she pretends not to care," Lydia said slowly, "because Mama is always harping on how beautiful all of us are except for Mary. It must hurt her very much to be disdained for her face, and she is..."

"Protecting herself by quoting Bible verses?" Kitty mused. "That sounds quite

possible.”

Silence fell for another two minutes.

“Lydia?”

“Yes?”

“Why do you care about Mary’s feelings? You never did before.”

Lydia turned onto her back and stared at the dim ceiling above her. “I care because ... because Mama ... Kitty, Mama is, I think, not very wise.”

“Not wise?”

“No. You know she has talked incessantly for years about how we need to be married as soon as possible because of the entail. When I was in Brighton, I was so very happy when Wickham asked me to marry him. I would have gone to the ends of the earth with him, secure that I was the most fortunate of us all because I had attracted the notice of such a charming, good looking man. Then it turned out that his handsome countenance concealed a monster. I doubt he would have married me, Kitty, ever. He would have ... have used me for his own pleasure and then thrown me into the ditch. I could have died, and he would not have cared in the least.”

“Do you really think so?”

“I do. Mama is so upset about the entail that she thinks any husband is better than no husband. She is wrong; can you imagine being married to a man like Wickham? As for Mary, she is not as pretty as we are, but that is hardly her fault. She is hardworking and diligent and would make a good wife, but more than that, I want her to be happy as she is, not constantly feeling that she is less important than we are because of her face.”

Kitty reached out an impulsive hand to touch Lydia’s arm. “I would like that too.”

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“Fitzwilliam!” Georgiana Darcy shrieked, throwing herself into her brother’s arms.

“Georgiana!” Darcy exclaimed, pulling his little sister closer to his own broad chest. “I am so happy to see you! I apologize for being so late to return to Darcy House, but...”

“But,” Georgiana said, pulling away and smiling roguishly, “I understand from Richard that you were quite busy visiting Miss Elizabeth Bennet, shortly to be Mrs. Darcy!”

“I was,” he agreed, his face alight with joy. “Georgiana, you will adore her!”

“Richard has already told me a fair amount about her,” his sister said, looking at Colonel Fitzwilliam, “but I wish to hear more. Oh, Brother, I am so excited. I am to have a sister at last!”

## Chapter 25

Mary Bennet glowered into the mirror and said, “Lydia, Kitty, I do not care how I look. After all, the Holy Word says, when speaking of a woman’s beauty, ‘let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, or of wearing of gold, or of putting on apparel...’”

“Yes, Mary,” Lydia agreed with spurious meekness, “but was not Queen Esther handsome? Her beauty was a gift which led her to become queen, which in turn resulted in the salvation of the Jewish people. Surely, being pretty can be used in a way that honors God.”

Mary, thoroughly taken aback by this argument, sat in silent consideration while Lydia hastily braided and curled her hair in a more attractive style, and Kitty rapidly stitched white lace on Mary’s overly severe day dress. When their elder sister emerged from her reverie, she found herself stepping out of her dressing gown into a more attractive dress and her face, softened by her new hairstyle, looked quite pretty.

“Mary, Mr. Bingley is here!” Mrs. Bennet

shrieked from the lower floor.

“Do tell me if Mrs. Audley has had her newest baby, Mary,” Kitty requested.

“I will,” Mary answered, shooting an incredulous glance at the mirror before hurrying out the door. “I am coming, Mother!”

Kitty waited until Mary was safely downstairs before turning an admiring look on Lydia. “That was very clever to speak of Queen Esther.”

“Was it not?” Lydia boasted. “I woke up very early and spent three hours looking through the Bible for examples of beautiful women. I decided Esther was the best one to talk about today, and perhaps I will speak of Rebekah tomorrow, who combined beauty with diligence in her tasks – she took care of camels! Sarah is not a wonderful example, I fear; she was so beautiful that a king snatched her and put her in his harem.”

“No, Mary would not like that,” Kitty agreed wholeheartedly.

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“I am sorry, Madam, but there was no turbot to be had for love or money,” the Cook informed her mistress.

Mrs. Bennet groaned and massaged her forehead with one unquiet hand. “Very well, we will be forced to have chicken for dinner; have one of the men butcher two young ones. Do we have peas?”

“Yes, Mrs. Bennet, delightful, fresh peas.”

“Very good. Do make fresh macaroons as well. Mr. Bingley promised to attend dinner with us tonight and must be made to feel welcome! It cannot be so very long until Jane returns, after all; I have no doubt once he sees her exquisite countenance, he will fall in love with her again!”

“Yes, madam,” the cook said patiently, glancing hopefully toward the door. She had a great deal to do for dinner, and her mistress’s chattering was preventing her from getting any work done.

There was a sudden, most welcome hullabaloo of noise from the outer hall, including cries of excitement from Lydia and Kitty. “Jane, Elizabeth! You are home!”

Mrs. Bennet flew out of the kitchen in a

frenzy and arrived in the front vestibule to discover that yes, her two eldest daughters had arrived, in company with Mr. Darcy, of all people, and a well-dressed gentleman who was, oddly enough, missing his left arm.

“Elizabeth, Jane!” she exclaimed in delight. “Oh, how thankful I am that you have returned!”

“We are delighted to be here,” Elizabeth answered, embracing her mother with surprising fervor. “Mama, you remember Mr. Darcy, of course? May I please introduce Mr. Hartford? We stayed with Mr. Hartford and his mother, Lady Amelia Hartford, in Brighton.”

“Welcome, welcome!” Mrs. Bennet said hospitably, leading the party toward the drawing room. Once inside, she glanced hastily at the clock on the mantelpiece and relaxed. Mr. Bingley, Mr. Bennet, and Mary had departed only a half hour previously and would be gone for at least two hours, probably three. She had plenty of time to speak to Jane about the return of her suitor.

“Is Father here?” Elizabeth asked once the party had settled into chairs.

“No, Mr. Bennet is visiting the Simpsons



along with,” and here she peered intently at Jane, who was seated next to the one armed man, “along with Mr. Bingley.”

“Is he indeed?” Elizabeth inquired in some disappointment. “Do you know when Father will return?”

Her mother stared at her in some perplexity. “I daresay it will be two or three hours. Mr. Bingley has agreed to stay for dinner. Is that not wonderful, Jane?”

“It is of no concern to me,” Jane responded composedly. “I do not have any quarrel with Mr. Bingley, but his presence or absence is a matter of entire indifference to me.”

Mrs. Bennet looked as if she would faint at these traitorous words, and Elizabeth hastily leaned forward to pat her mother’s hand. “It is Father we very much want to see, Mother. You see, Mr. Darcy wishes to speak urgently to him.”

Mrs. Bennet stared at her second daughter in bewilderment, then at Darcy, and then back at Elizabeth. She, who spent her waking hours scheming and plotting to find marriage partners for her daughters, had not so much as considered the possibility that...

“Are you ... are you saying,” she quavered, “that...”

“Yes, Mrs. Bennet,” Darcy said gently. “I admire and love your daughter Elizabeth, and plan to make her my wife.”

This provoked a soft squeal from the lady of the house, who promptly collapsed back against her seat and lifted her handkerchief to her eyes. “Ten thousand pounds a year! Oh, wait until I see your father, Elizabeth! To think that it was Mr. Darcy courting you. Oh!”

Elizabeth glanced nervously at Darcy and was relieved to see him smiling a little. “Miss Bennet,” he said, rising to his feet, “I remember from my previous visits that you have a lovely little wilderness behind Longbourn. Perhaps you could show it to Mr. Hartford and me?”

Jane rose with alacrity. “Yes, that is an excellent idea. Elizabeth, do you wish to accompany us?”

“I will stay with Mother,” Elizabeth said, smiling gratefully at her fiancé. Far better to have Darcy and Hartford elsewhere during Mrs. Bennet’s initial ecstasy over her daughter’s engagement to a rich man!

Mrs. Bennet, who had been longing for a daughter married since Jane was fifteen, hardly noticed the departure of all but Elizabeth. When she finally lowered her handkerchief, it was to reveal a countenance of bewildered ecstasy. "My dearest Elizabeth!" she exclaimed. "Mrs. Darcy, how well it sounds! What pin money you will have! Ten thousand pounds a year! You will be mistress of Pemberley! Oh!"

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"I appreciate your assistance today very much, Miss Mary," Bingley said as the carriage turned into the drive which led to Longbourn. "I believe the Audleys were far more comfortable in my presence since they already know you quite well."

"It was my pleasure," Mary assured him, and then was taken aback at her willingness to speak. She had always been uncomfortable around eligible gentlemen since she knew that every one of them was comparing her to her more handsome sisters. Instead she felt confident of her position today; Mr. Bingley was interested in his tenants, not her personal

appearance, which was strangely freeing.

“I am also most grateful to you, Mr. Bennet, though I confess to some feelings of inferiority after meeting the Simpson family. They are truly a race of giants, are they not?”

Mr. Bennet chortled and said, “Yes. I know I am not a particularly short man, but when I stand alongside the Simpson sons, I feel quite Lilliputian!”

Mary, who had been gazing absently out the carriage window, now stiffened in surprise as they approached Longbourn. “Is that not Jane?”

Mr. Bingley found himself shifting rapidly to the other side of his seat to stare longingly out the window. If Miss Bennet had returned already to Longbourn, perhaps her fledgling courtship with Mr. Hartford had come to an early end?

A moment later, hope turned to despair. There were two gentlemen escorting Miss Bennet, and while they were both turned away from him, he clearly observed the empty left sleeve of one of them. Mr. Hartford had followed the lady to Hertfordshire, which could only mean that the courtship was proceeding apace.

He was dimly aware of the carriage stopping, dimly aware of Mr. Bennet stepping outside, dimly aware of the father assisting his daughter onto the carriage way. Only when Bennet's confused stare landed on his face did Bingley break free from his bemused state. He climbed, a little shakily, down from the carriage and forced himself to stand tall, to wipe the disappointment and sorrow from his face. It was not Miss Bennet's fault that he had abandoned her almost a year previously. For her sake, and for his own sense of pride, he would behave like a gentleman, even if he was merely the son of Mr. Peter Bingley, tradesman.

Jane had not noticed the presence of her former admirer, consumed as she was by the sight of Mary and her father. "It is so very good to see you both!" she cried. "Mary, how well you look!"

"I am glad to have you home as well, Jane. Where is Elizabeth?" Mr. Bennet asked.

"She is with Mother in the drawing room," Jane explained with a smile. "Mary, you already know Mr. Darcy, of course, but I wish to introduce you to a new friend of ours, Mr. Hartford. We stayed with his mother when we were in Brighton. Mr. Hartford, my

sister Mary.”

The lady and the gentleman made appropriate curtsies and bows, and then Mr. Darcy asked, “May I speak to you, Mr. Bennet, at your convenience?”

Bennet looked up into the taller man’s face and nodded, “By all means, Mr. Darcy. Is now a suitable time?”

“It is.”

The two men strode off to a side door which led to the library and Jane, her eyes still fixed on Mary’s face, asked, “I understood from Mother that you and Father were visiting the Simpsons this morning? Are they well?”

“They are very well,” Mary said, feeling nervous in the presence of an unknown gentleman, and a disabled one at that. “Mr. Bingley wished to meet them so that some of their sons could assist the Audleys; Mr. Audley is still not able to move around well after breaking his leg.”

This alerted Mr. Hartford and Jane to the presence of Bingley, and both watched as the latter walked over and bowed. “Miss Bennet, Mr. Hartford, it is good to see you again. I hope you are both well.”

Jane’s smile was serene and beautiful,

but her eyes no longer looked upon him with affection. He had lost his chance with her, thrown it away, due to his own foolishness. “We are very well, Mr. Bingley. I hope you are well too?”

He was not well. He might never be well again. Still, he said bravely, “Yes, Miss Bennet, I am very well. Thank you. I found my time with Mr. Bennet and Miss Mary to be most useful. I must return to Netherfield now; would you be kind enough to give my compliments to Mrs. Bennet and tell her that I am, regrettably, unable to attend her dinner tonight?”

Mary looked startled, but Jane only nodded. “Of course, Mr. Bingley. I hope that you can join us for dinner another time.”

“Thank you,” he said and, taking a deep breath, turned to Gabriel. “Mr. Hartford, may I inquire where you will be staying while in Hertfordshire?”

“Mr. Darcy and I have taken rooms at the Pig in the Poke in Meryton,” Gabriel answered, his eyes watchful.

“I would be honored and pleased if you and Darcy would stay at Netherfield Hall, sir.”

Gabriel blinked at the other man in

surprise and then said, “Thank you for your kind invitation. I will speak to Darcy on the matter.”



## Chapter 26

“Good night, Mr. Darcy, good night!” Mrs. Bennet cried out hospitably. “You are welcome at Longbourn any time!”

“Thank you, Mrs. Bennet,” Darcy replied with weary courtesy. Dinner at Longbourn had been a mixture of pleasure and frustration; on the one hand, he always enjoyed his time with Elizabeth. On the other, Mrs. Bennet, while not at her most garrulous, was overly fulsome toward him, which he found tedious.

“Jane and I will walk the gentlemen out,” Elizabeth said and Darcy eagerly took her arm and stepped out into the relative cool of the August evening. As soon as the foursome were comfortably out of earshot of anyone within, Elizabeth said quietly, “I fear Mother desires a very elaborate wedding breakfast, which I find a fatiguing prospect. What would you think of being married by common license, and soon?”

“I can think of nothing more wonderful,” Darcy said fervently. “Mr. Bennet has given his blessing of our marriage at whatever time we find convenient, though I must go to London for a few days to prepare the marriage

settlements.”

“Wonderful. How about two weeks from today?”

Darcy felt as if his chest with explode with happiness. “That is perfect, Elizabeth, though if I could marry you this very moment, I would not hesitate!”

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“Jane!” Mrs. Bennet screeched as soon as her two eldest daughters stepped into the parlor where her mother and sisters were sitting. “What did you say to Mr. Bingley after he returned with your father and Mary? He was supposed to come to dinner tonight!”

Jane arched one blond eyebrow and said, “I said nothing to Mr. Bingley beyond the conventional courtesies today, but when I saw him a few days ago in Sussex, I made it clear that I no longer desire his attentions. I want nothing more to do with Mr. Bingley, Mother. He left me last December without so much as a word of farewell, and I have no intention of renewing our friendship.”

The matron stared at her generally

tractable eldest with incredulity. “But ... but Jane! He is master of Netherfield and has at least four thousand pounds a year! Surely you would not be so unkind as to – Jane, I insist that you accept Mr. Bingley’s attentions!”

“I will not, Mother,” Jane said calmly, sitting down next to Mary and accepting a cup of tea from her hand. “I am more than halfway in love with another gentleman and expect that I will marry him within a few months.”

Mrs. Bennet froze at these astonishing words, “Another gentleman? Of whom are you speaking, my love?”

“Mr. Hartford, of course. Why did you imagine he journeyed from Brighton to Meryton, Mama? We are courting!”

The hopeful look on her mother’s face faded away, to be replaced by distaste. “Mr. Hartford?! He is missing an arm!”

“Yes, he is,” Jane snapped, her face suffused pink with indignation. “He lost that arm while serving as an officer at Corunna. He is one of the many heroes who have sacrificed to keep us safe. There is no shame in his disability!”

“But how can he possibly care for you and your children with only one arm!”

To everyone's surprise, Lydia piped up, "You need not be concerned about that, Mama. I saw him handling a team of horses with only one arm. He is extraordinarily adept."

Mrs. Bennet shook her head in confusion. "How do you know Mr. Hartford, Lydia?"

"I stayed with his mother, Lady Amelia, after I hurt myself, and Mr. Harford was also in residence," Lydia explained patiently.

Mrs. Bennet's eyes brightened. "His mother was born into the nobility? Is he an eldest son?"

"No, but he is master of his own estate fifteen miles from Brighton," Jane said. "The income from Beehaven is about 1500 pounds a year now, and he has many ideas for improvements to the land which should lead to increased funds over time."

Mrs. Bennet scrunched her face as she cogitated over this information. Mr. Hartford had noble relations, which was pleasing, but he was a younger son and not physically whole. Surely her beautiful, eldest daughter was meant for someone better?

"Now Jane," she pleaded, doing her best

to look piteous, “you know that Mr. Bingley is such a kind, handsome gentleman, and he is wealthier than Mr. Hartford. Furthermore, he has leased Netherfield, which is close to Longbourn, and I long to have you live near me when you wed. It is a great pity that Mr. Bingley was called away by business for so many months, but he has returned now...”

“No,” Jane interrupted, rising to her feet. “Mr. Bingley is, without a doubt, a pleasant young man, but I am quite determined to marry a man who knows his own mind. Mr. Hartford is brave, intelligent, kind, diligent and hardworking, and he has pursued me with ardent dedication. If he asked me to marry him tomorrow, I would almost certainly accept!”

She stalked out of the room, leaving her three youngest sisters wide eyed in wonder.

Mrs. Bennet dissolved into noisy tears and Elizabeth, with a roll of her eyes, gestured for Mary, Kitty, and Lydia to leave the room. The three girls did so with grateful alacrity, and once they had achieved the corridor outside, Kitty whispered, “Have you ever seen Jane like that?”

“No,” Lydia answered with a cheeky

smile, “but I confess I am quite enjoying her spirit.”

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Darcy stepped into the billiard room at Netherfield Hall with a bizarre sense of unreality. It had been almost a full year since he had first come to Hertfordshire, to Meryton, to Netherfield, and he and Bingley had spent many hours in this room playing billiards and enjoying one another’s company.

It was incredible to think that in one short year, he had fallen in love with Elizabeth Bennet, been violently rejected, realized his own shortcomings, grabbed fiercely to an opportunity to make amends with his darling, and managed to win her heart and hand. In less than two weeks, he and Elizabeth would be joined together before God and man until death parted them.

“Would you care for some Madeira, Darcy?” Bingley asked, lifting up a bottle.

Darcy said. “Yes, I would, and Bingley, thank you for being willing to host Mr. Hartford and me. I confess I was surprised to find you here at Netherfield again after what

came to pass in Sussex.”

Bingley took his time about pouring the wine, and after handing his friend his glass, he took his own cup and sat down in a comfortable chair at the end of the room. “I had quite an epiphany a few days ago, Darcy; I realized that for the last ten years, perhaps more, I have been drifting along in life aimlessly, with occasional alterations in course based on the whims and desires of my friends and family.”

Darcy winced at this. “I am sorry, Bingley. I know that it was I who discouraged you last December, and it burdens my soul that I falsely convinced you that Miss Bennet was not attached to you.”

Bingley, who had been contemplating the amber liquid in his cup, lifted his eyes to stare directly into his friend’s. “You were wrong in your estimation of the lady’s feelings, and it was disingenuous of you to conceal Miss Bennet’s presence in Town at the beginning of this year. I was angry at you, but I have forgiven you.”

“Thank you,” Darcy responded humbly. He was inclined to continue berating himself but that would be more for his own sake than

Bingley's.

"I am more angry at myself," his friend continued. "I knew in my heart of hearts that you were wrong about Miss Bennet's feelings toward me, but I did not trust my own understanding of the matter. Not only did I lose my chance with the lady, I disappointed her grievously and no doubt exposed her to the unkind gossip of her neighbors. You were, I know, acting in what you believed to be my best interests. My sisters Caroline and Louisa were being selfish, as usual; Caroline, in particular, wishes me to marry a woman of connections to pave her way into high society."

"That is true enough, I fear."

Bingley nodded grimly, and for a few minutes, the two friends were lost in silent thought.

"May I ask why you have returned to Netherfield?" Darcy finally asked hesitantly. "It seems that it would be a painful place to dwell now."

Bingley shrugged. "It is, but if I cannot win the lady I love, I can at least prove faithful as the current landlord of this estate. The tenants here have been neglected for several



years now, and they would benefit from a master who actually cares about their well-being.”

“That is true enough,” Darcy agreed. “I applaud you for your determination to do what is right, Bingley. I hope, in time, that you will find love with another.”

Bingley sighed and said, “It seems unlikely, my friend, but thank you.”

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Mr. Darcy and Mr. Hartford called at Longbourn early the next morning. Indeed, it was so early that Mrs. Bennet, who had worn herself out the previous night grieving the loss of Mr. Bingley as a potential son-in-law, had not yet descended from her bedroom. Jane and Elizabeth promptly swept their gentlemen out of doors into the wilderness behind Longbourn, whereupon the two couples took slightly divergent paths in order to enjoy some privacy.

“I plan to return to London in two days, Elizabeth, if that is permissible,” Darcy said. “I will consult with my man of business and arrange for the marriage settlements, and

when I return to Netherfield, I will bring my sister and Colonel Fitzwilliam.”

“I am looking forward very much to meeting Miss Darcy and seeing the colonel again,” Elizabeth said, “but I will miss you.”

“I will miss you too,” Darcy replied huskily, “but soon we will be together again forever.”

“Indeed, we will,” Elizabeth said, smiling with delight.

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“This is a very pleasant wilderness,” Mr. Hartford mused, looking around with an expert eye. “Your gardener has incorporated a number of native plants into the landscape. The bees and butterflies are no doubt most appreciative.”

Jane laughed and said, “You can thank my mother for that. She has a remarkable eye for designing a pleasing layout of flowers and shrubs and trees. It is surprising as she is not particularly fond of the outdoors.”

“It is far more beautiful than Netherfield’s gardens, which are, in my

opinion, overly formal.”

“Did you and Mr. Darcy stay at Netherfield last night, then?”

“I did,” he said, glancing anxiously down at her.

“I hope you were comfortable?”

“I was very comfortable, yes, but I accepted Mr. Bingley’s invitation to stay at Netherfield so that I could better know the man. Our acquaintance is a nascent one, of course, but he does seem a fine individual, and Mr. Darcy values him as a friend. I am well aware that he is wealthier than I am, and whole in body. I merely wish to say that if you ever have any doubts about our courtship, you must tell me without hesitation.”

Jane shook a reproving finger at her admirer. “Now, Mr. Hartford, I insist that you stop worrying about Mr. Bingley! He is a pleasant gentleman, but I no longer care for him in the least. Were either of his sisters at Netherfield?”

“No,” Gabriel answered, his entire body relaxing at the lady’s words. “I have not had the pleasure of meeting any other member of his family.”

Jane grimaced adorably and said, “I fear

it would be no great pleasure. His younger sister, Miss Bingley, can be pleasant enough if she wishes, but she is a gossip and a termagant. One of the many things I appreciate about you, sir, is that you are able to make decisions without bending to the will of those around you. Mr. Bingley is so easygoing that he permits his sisters to pressure him into actions that are not in his best interests.”

Gabriel began strolling toward the stables, Jane’s hand tucked in his arm. “A good officer in the army must learn to make decisions or his men will suffer. My mother would say that I knew my own mind as a young man, but my military service honed my ability to rapidly select a course of action.”

“I suppose that when an enemy army is bearing down upon you, there is little time for indecision.”

Gabriel’s gaze grew faraway and for a brief moment, he could hear once again the sound of musket fire, and the screams of injured men. “You are entirely correct, Miss Bennet.”

“Are you well, Jane?” Elizabeth asked as she entered her elder sister’s bedroom that night.

Jane looked up from her dressing table, where she had been combing out her blonde locks. “I am more than well, Lizzy. I like Mr. Hartford so very much!”

“He is a wonderful man,” Elizabeth concurred, before adding, “not as wonderful as Mr. Darcy, of course, but I grant him my approval as your suitor.”

To her astonished amusement, Jane grabbed a moistened rag and threw it at Elizabeth’s head, which she dodged with some difficulty.

“Jane,” she said in mock reproof, “you are growing quite saucy in your old age.”

Her sister chuckled and said, “That is your fault, is it not? You have been telling me for years that I am too inclined to think well of everyone, as well as foolishly forgiving.”

“I do believe that we have both made needed corrections to our characters,” Elizabeth said, suddenly serious. “I was too inclined to judge hastily, with far too much pride in my own discernment.”

“And I was a fool to think that men and women are always well meaning. Mr. Wickham taught me that.”

“Yes, Wickham was a truly foul wretch,” Elizabeth concurred. “Even now. I shiver at the thought of all of us ruined, which would almost certainly have prevented me from marrying my dear Fitzwilliam. I feel blessed by God indeed that we escaped without a horrific scandal. It also seems that Lydia has truly learned something from her frightening experience.”

Jane put down her comb at this. “I have not made time to speak to Lydia yet. I see her bruise is fading, but I hope that she is not too dreadfully affected in a spiritual sense.”

“If it had been Kitty, the experience might well have been devastating,” Elizabeth mused, “but I think for Lydia it has merely dampened her excessive ebullience. I spoke to her this evening at some length while Mother was berating you again about Mr. Bingley and Mr. Hartford; I do wish she would stop that.”

Her elder sister waved a casual hand, “I am not perturbed by it, Lizzy. Mr. Hartford and I will continue our courtship, though we may choose to meet at Lucas Lodge or at our

aunt Philips's home some days in order to avoid Mama. But please, do go on."

"Lydia told me that she has realized that Mama's desire that she marry at sixteen is foolish, and she is content to stay home for the time being. Apparently, she has also decided to amuse herself by working on Mary's appearance; hence, the new hairstyle and clothing. She and Kitty are sneaking into Mary's closet when Mary is away and adding ribbons and lace and the like to her overly severe dresses."

"I wondered about that!" Jane exclaimed. "It seemed quite extraordinary that Mary would bother with such things."

"Lydia says, and I believe she is correct, that Mary pretends not to care about her appearance because Mother is always denigrating how she looks. So she..."

"Toils away to show herself accomplished instead," Jane finished. "That is insightful of Lydia. I am startled that Mary is going along with it, though she does look far prettier than she did."

Elizabeth laughed and said, "Lydia is being very clever! She keeps telling stories about beautiful women in the Bible whose

beauty was a blessing, like Rebekah and Esther and Rachel.”

“That is dexterous indeed!”

“Yes, it is. I wonder if this near disaster at Brighton will be the making of our youngest sister.”

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“Oh!” Charlotte Collins cried out.

Mr. Collins, who had been gazing adoringly out the window towards the grand edifice of Rosings in the distance, turned to gaze in surprise at his wife. The lady, usually so placid, was staring down at a letter in her hand with a startled expression on her face.

“What is it, my dear Charlotte?” he asked. “Is that a letter from Lady Lucas?”

She looked up and beamed at him. “Yes, and with such incredible news! Mr. Darcy is engaged to my friend, Elizabeth Bennet!”

Mr. William Collins, rector at Hunsford, looked foolish most of the time; with his mouth hanging open, and his small eyes wide in horror, he looked entirely ridiculous.



“You must be mistaken, my dear,” he finally squeaked. “Mr. Darcy is engaged to the most beautiful flower in all of Kent, Miss de Bourgh!”

Charlotte suppressed a sigh of impatience and said, with practiced gentleness, “My mother says that Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy are to be married in Meryton soon, so I can only presume that Mr. Darcy does not consider himself affianced to his cousin.”

Mr. Collins spent another minute gaping like a lake trout before leaping to his feet in a frenzy. “I must tell Lady Catherine of this immediately! She will not permit this travesty!”

Charlotte Collins opened her mouth in protest and then closed it. There was no point in arguing with her husband; he considered his patroness as much, or more, an authority than God Himself.

She waited until she could see her husband running awkwardly down the road towards Rosings and then said aloud, “I am sorry, Elizabeth.”

## Chapter 27

“I wish we could get a pineapple for the wedding breakfast,” Mrs. Bennet said. “That would be truly elegant!”

Elizabeth, who was reluctantly accustomed to every meal involving endless conversations about her upcoming wedding, said patiently, “Mama, most pineapples are rotting by the time they appear as a centerpiece. Please do not worry; our wedding breakfast will be delightful!”

“I only hope that we will have enough cakes!”

“Mrs. Miller is going to assist Cook with the baking, is she not? She is a wonderful baker,” said Kitty, nibbling on a biscuit.

“Yes, she makes such delectable confections!” her mother agreed. “I am sure Lady Lucas will be most impressed; Charlotte Collins’s wedding breakfast was not nearly so fancy, but then Charlotte did not marry a man worth ten thousand pounds a year!”

The door to the dining room opened, and to Elizabeth’s relief, Lydia, who had finished eating dinner earlier, bounced in and

said, "A carriage just arrived! Could it be Mr. Darcy?"

Puzzled, Elizabeth turned to peer out the dining room windows. "He cannot possibly be back yet as he needed time to arrange for the settlements. I wonder ... oh! It is Lady Catherine de Bourgh! Oh dear!"

Mr. Bennet, who had been phlegmatically eating his way through his dinner without contributing to the wedding discussion, looked up in surprise at his daughter's exclamation. He stood up and strolled over to look outside at the middle aged lady, her face set in angry lines, who was marching determinedly toward the front door of Longbourn.

"So that is Lady Catherine de Bourgh?" he asked. "Why do you suppose she is here, Lizzy?"

Elizabeth, caught between amusement and distress, said, "Given the lady's thunderous countenance, it seems she has been informed of my engagement to Mr. Darcy, whom she has long contended is engaged to her only daughter. She is here, no doubt, to insist that I give up all pretenses of becoming Mrs. Darcy."

“You will not do so, Elizabeth, surely?” Mrs. Bennet quavered. “It should not matter that Lady Catherine thinks that...”

“Of course not, Mama,” her daughter interposed. “I love Fitzwilliam and he loves me, and there is nothing Lady Catherine can do to prevent our marriage. However, I do not suppose she will depart without seeing me, so I had best go speak to the lady so that she can say what she wishes.”

She took a step toward the door, only to be halted by her father’s gentle hand on her shoulder. “Nonsense, Lizzy. I am master of Longbourn and your father, and you are not even quite of age yet. I will speak to Lady Catherine and explain the situation.”

Elizabeth looked up at her father with a frown. “Are you certain, Father? I have met her before, you know, and she does not frighten me.”

Mr. Bennet, who had been biting his tongue for days while dealing with his wife and daughters, grinned cheerfully at the prospect of unleashing his wit on a member of the nobility. “I assure you that I look forward to discussing your upcoming marriage to Mr. Darcy with the mistress of Rosings.”

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“Lady Catherine,” Mr. Bennet said, sweeping grandly into the parlor where the lady, dressed in expensive traveling clothes, was standing rigidly in front of the window. “I am Mr. Bennet, master of this estate. Welcome to Longbourn!”

Lady Catherine turned around to display protruding brown eyes and clenched teeth, while a vein throbbed noticeably in her forehead. “I have no interest in speaking to you, Mr. Bennet. I command you to summon your second daughter, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, immediately!”

Mr. Bennet bowed and said, with spurious meekness, “I fear that is not possible, Lady Catherine, as my daughter is not available. However, I will, with all appropriate magnanimity, pass on a message to her, if you wish.”

Lady Catherine’s lips compressed with disgust, and she sat down with a huff. “Do sit down, Mr. Bennet.”

“Thank you,” Bennet returned gravely, amused at being offered a seat in his own

house. “Now, can I offer you some tea or coffee?”

“I have no time for refreshments, sir. I have heard a most alarming report and came here immediately to have it refuted. A ridiculous rumor is circulating that my nephew, Mr. Darcy of Pemberley, is engaged to your daughter Elizabeth.”

Bennet leaned back and folded his hands gracefully in his lap. “Yes, Mr. Darcy is indeed engaged to Elizabeth and will be marrying her in a little more than a week. I regret exceedingly that he did not inform you himself, but young people can be rather thoughtless, especially when they are in the throes of ardent love.”

Lady Catherine’s eyes were now bloodshot with outrage, and her turban, decorated with dyed ostrich feathers, shook with fury. “It is impossible! Mr. Darcy is engaged to my daughter, Miss Anne de Bourgh, heiress to Rosings! What have you to say to that, Mr. Bennet?”

“Why, I say it is nonsense, Lady Catherine. Your nephew described the situation to me very clearly when he asked for my daughter’s hand. You wish for a marriage

between the master of Pemberley to your daughter, the heiress of Rosings, and I can hardly fault you for that, but there are no formal engagement papers, and Mr. Darcy does not feel himself obligated, by honor or law, to your daughter. I fear you have wasted your time in traveling all this way. Are you certain you do not wish for some tea before you depart?"

Catherine de Bourgh stared at her host in genuine astonishment. Never in her life had she met with such casual indifference to her desires. "Do you know who I am, Mr. Bennet? I am the daughter of an earl, and one of Darcy's closest relations. I have only his best interests at heart, and he will be utterly destroyed if he marries a young woman of inferior birth, of no importance to the world, and wholly unallied to our family!"

Mr. Bennet felt a spurt of anger at these insulting words, but he knew instinctively that the lady would be far more bothered by insouciance than insults.

"Ah well, I daresay he will not be quite destroyed," he answered cheerfully, casually crossing his booted feet. "The young man has a good head on his shoulders, and my Lizzy is a clever young woman, if I do say so myself.

No, no, Lady Catherine, you must see that Darcy is quite the honeyfall for our family, especially with Longbourn entailed away to that clergyman of yours. Darcy has offered, Elizabeth has accepted, I have given my blessing, and I assure you that I would sue your nephew for breach of promise if he tried to withdraw now. I fear that Miss de Bourgh must find another husband, at her convenience, of course.”

Lady Catherine tried to speak, but was so upset, so outraged, so incredulous, that for a full thirty seconds she was only able to make gobbling noises. Mr. Bennet watched with some concern – it would not do if the woman actually died in his parlor from an apoplexy. Eventually, she recovered enough to hiss vituperatively at him for a full five minutes. He maintained his calm demeanor and then, when he grew bored of listening to her haranguing, rose to his feet and firmly ushered her out of Longbourn.

She, exhausted and defeated, went peacefully enough.



“Thank you, Jack!” Elizabeth said to the Longbourn coachman. “Please return with the carriage in four hours.”

“Yes, Miss Elizabeth.”

The three eldest Bennet girls climbed the steps to the front entrance of Netherfield. The door swung open immediately and the butler showed them into the drawing room, where Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Mr. Hartford were waiting for them, along with a tall, young blonde dressed in a simple pink muslin dress.

Darcy stepped forward, drawing the girl with him, and smiled down at his beloved. “Georgiana, please allow me to introduce you to Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Elizabeth, my dear sister, Miss Darcy.”

Elizabeth smiled up into the face of the taller, younger girl and curtsied. “It is wonderful to meet you at last, Miss Darcy.”

Georgiana had been eager to make the acquaintance of the woman who would marry her beloved brother, but to her horror, shyness closed her throat, rendering her unable to speak. She looked imploringly at her brother, who in turn looked worried, but Elizabeth merely reached out and took the girl’s hand.

“I have heard that you play music exceptionally well, Miss Darcy. I enjoy music very much, though I fear I play rather badly.”

Georgiana’s throat unclogged miraculously and she exclaimed, “You are teasing me, I know! My brother says you play and sing so very well!”

Elizabeth laughed and shot a saucy glance at her fiancé. “That, my dear Miss Darcy, shows just how much your brother loves me. I play and sing moderately well, but I fear I do not practice enough to truly excel. You see, I often have the best of intentions of spending an hour or two on the instrument, but then the trees and flowers and fields call me, and I abandon the pianoforte to frolic outside.”

“You will adore Pemberley then, Miss Elizabeth,” Georgiana gushed. “There are so many delightful walks, and we have a pond near the house which freezes over during the winter so we can go ice skating.”

“I have never ice skated!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “Do tell me about it, will you not?”

She guided Georgiana to a comfortable couch, and the two women sat down and

began conversing. Darcy, who had been feeling quite anxious at this meeting between the two most important women in his life, relaxed. He should never have doubted Elizabeth's ability to make his shy little sister comfortable.

"Miss Mary?" Bingley said to the third Bennet daughter. "I heard from my housekeeper that Mrs. Audley gave birth to a healthy baby girl last night. Do you have a suggestion about what additional assistance I can provide to the family?"

"Well, Darcy," Colonel Fitzwilliam said, slapping his cousin happily on the shoulder, "I confess that I have rarely been so happy in all my life, with Wickham removed permanently and my staid, boring cousin marrying a truly remarkable woman..."

"Miss Bennet?" Gabriel asked. He and Jane had withdrawn to the other end of the drawing room for privacy.

"Yes, Mr. Hartford?"

"I hope it was not too uncomfortable for you to visit Netherfield today?"

"Not at all," Jane assured him. "I am entirely at ease in the presence of Mr. Bingley."

Gabriel cast a quick glance at the master of Netherfield and then turned back to the woman who had won his heart. "Miss Bennet, I wished to say that these last few days have been the most wonderful of my life. I fear I must return to Beehaven shortly after your sister's wedding, and I hoped that ... well, I love you very much, and perhaps we could ..."

"You love me?" Jane asked, her eyes suddenly glowing with inward fire.

"With all of my heart and soul and mind," he said fervently.

"Do you wish to marry me, then?"

"Yes! More than anything else in the world."

"Then I accept your hand in marriage, Mr. Hartford."

He blinked at her in astonishment, and she awarded him a shy smile.

"Miss Bennet ... Jane," he breathed fervently, grasping her gloved hand. "Thank you, my darling Jane. Thank you."

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“What can I do for you, Mr. Hartford?” Mr. Bennet inquired lazily. Longbourn was a rather noisy place with Mrs. Bennet rushing to and fro making frantic arrangements for the upcoming wedding breakfast, but the library was still his quiet space, his oasis.

Mr. Hartford promptly seated himself across from the master of Longbourn and said, “Sir, I am in love with your daughter, Miss Bennet, and have asked for her hand in marriage. She accepted, and I request your blessing.”

Bennet’s mouth drooped open foolishly for a full two seconds before he recovered enough to blurt out, “You have only known one another for about two weeks!”

Hartford nodded and said, “That is true enough, sir, but in our brief time together, we have come to genuinely know and love one other. She is a marvelous woman, and I know that I am the most fortunate man in the world to win her heart. However, I respect your concern that we have not known one another long; if you are unwilling to bless our immediate marriage, we will continue courting.”

Bennet found himself staring at his

hands, which were shaking like blancmanges. It was hard enough losing Elizabeth, but Jane as well? He would be surrounded by his foolish wife and his silly daughters, not merely for a few months, but forever.

After all, had he not resolved to be a less selfish father? If Jane wished to marry this man, then he should not stand in her way.

“You have my blessing,” he said, forcing himself to smile at the anxious young man. “I will miss my Jane very much, of course, but she is a sensible woman and if she is certain of her happiness with you, then I can only concur. Nor have I forgotten that you, along with Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam, are instrumental in the salvation of our family when you saved Lydia. I would never deny you and Jane your happiness together.”

Gabriel Hartford relaxed in relief.  
“Thank you, sir.”

/

“Mrs. Bennet, daughters, Mr. Darcy, Colonel Fitzwilliam, it is my honor to inform you that Mr. Hartford asked Jane to be his wife, and she has accepted him. Jane, I

congratulate you. You will be happy together.”

Jane went to him immediately and embraced him. “Thank you, Father. Gabriel and I will indeed be happy.”

Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam, who had accompanied Gabriel to Longbourn, strode forward and shook the man heartily by the hand, while the younger girls milled around, crying out their felicitations to their eldest sister. In the midst of the hullabaloo, Elizabeth moved quickly to her mother’s side; the matron was looking quite put out, which her second daughter found thoroughly bewildering.

“Mama?” Elizabeth said, “what is wrong?”

“Oh Lizzy,” Mrs. Bennet answered, her eyes swimming with tears, “to think that my Jane could have married Mr. Bingley if only she had tried. Then I could have enjoyed having her live nearby at Netherfield, and she would have had plenty of money!”

Elizabeth compressed her lips with irritation, but long experience with her mother encouraged her to say soothingly, “That is true enough, but at least Jane will have wonderful

connections after her marriage. Mr. Harford's mother is a member of the nobility, after all, and Mr. Hartford is acquainted with the Prince Regent himself!"

Mrs. Bennet peered in astonishment at her daughter. "The Prince Regent, Lizzy? Surely you are joking!"

"Not at all! Jane and Mr. Hartford were walking along the Steyne in Brighton, along with Lady Amelia, and the Prince Regent came up and spoke to Mr. Hartford as, if not an old friend, at least a recognized acquaintance."

Mrs. Bennet turned back toward Gabriel and Jane, who were now arm in arm, smiling happily, and breathed out, "Oh, to think that my son by marriage knows the Regent himself. How envious Lady Lucas will be!"

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"Jane, Mr. Hartford?" Elizabeth said as she and her elder sister accompanied the gentlemen outside Longbourn to their carriage.

"Yes, Lizzy?"

"Fitzwilliam and I spoke a few minutes



ago, and we wonder whether you and Mr. Hartford would care to join us in a double wedding ceremony.”

Jane looked up at her fiancé with sparkling eyes, “Oh Gabriel, would that not be wonderful? We could return to Beehaven married!”

Gabriel flushed with excitement but then his face fell, “I would love it above all things, Miss Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy, but do we have enough time for the necessary arrangements?”

“There are still six days before the ceremony,” Elizabeth said, “and I presume writing up the settlements will not be overly difficult?”

“No, though it would take some time to return to Brighton to consult with my solicitor there.”

“Gabriel, my love, my uncle Philips is a solicitor! He could write up the settlements.”

“I would be honored to procure a marriage license for you,” Colonel Fitzwilliam offered.

“Mr. Hartford, you could send an express to Sussex immediately, which would allow Lady Amelia to come in time for the wedding,” Darcy suggested.

Gabriel blinked, astonished and touched, “Thank you. Very well, we would be overjoyed to be married along with you and Miss Elizabeth, if you truly do not mind.”

Darcy looked at Elizabeth, who was gazing fondly at her beloved sister, and he smiled broadly. “We would be delighted, Mr. Hartford.”

/

“Jane?” Elizabeth asked softly from the doorway into her elder sister’s room. The household had retired late to bed after all the excitement of the day, but Elizabeth could not sleep until she had spoken to her favorite sister alone.

Jane Bennet, who was standing in front of a mirror carefully removing the pins in her hair, turned and smiled joyfully. “Come in, Lizzy! Oh, I am so happy!”

Elizabeth stepped in and carefully closed the door behind her, then hurried forward to embrace Jane. “I am so happy for you too, my dear sister. Happy and, now that I have had time to think about it, rather astonished. You have known Mr. Hartford for less than a

month, after all.”

There was a subtle note of worry in Elizabeth’s voice, and Jane, her hair now free from its coiffure, sat down on the bed and patted the place beside her invitingly. “Sit down, my Lizzy. You are worried that we are marrying too quickly?”

Elizabeth lowered herself onto the bed obediently and grimaced. “I trust you, my dear, but it was rather a whirlwind courtship. If you have any doubts at all, well, I think we might have pressured you into an early wedding, and that concerns me.”

“I have no doubts at all, and am delighted that we will be married in less than a week. I am entirely confident of my decision. As I told you a few days ago, I believe I know Gabriel better than I ever knew Mr. Bingley; we have spoken to one another from the heart many times since we first met. Nor did I have any intention of letting Gabriel return to home to Beehaven without becoming engaged.”

Elizabeth lifted her eyes to her sister’s with concern.

“You are afraid he would not return?” she asked slowly. “Like Mr. Bingley?”

Jane Bennet stared back and said, "Yes and no, dear Lizzy. Yes, I am afraid he would not return, but no, not for the same reasons that Mr. Bingley did not come back to Netherfield last year. Gabriel struggles with ... well, he lost his arm, of course, and it makes him feel less important, less valuable, than men who are still whole."

"That is ridiculous!"

"It is to me and to you," Jane continued with a sad smile, "but it is not ridiculous to Mother, and to many other busybodies in this world. Gabriel is a wonderful man, but I worry that he feels that he does not deserve me. If he returned home without an engagement, he might well convince himself that I should find someone better, and I have no intention of permitting his own sense of inferiority from bringing about such an unfortunate conclusion."

"He did ask you to marry him," Elizabeth mused, "so he must have felt at least moderately confident."

"Well, as to that," Jane said, blushing rosily, "it could be argued that I asked him to marry me."

Her sister regarded her in wonder. "You

are joking, surely!”

“He told me he would need to return to Beehaven after your wedding, and said that he loved me. I asked him if he wished to marry me. He said yes, above all else. I told him that I accepted his offer.”

Elizabeth found herself suddenly laughing convulsively. Jane, who had been looking a trifle flustered, began laughing as well; for a full two minutes, the young women were quite unable to speak. When Elizabeth had recovered enough to form words, she said, “My darling Jane, you are quite cured from being the overly sedate sister of my youth. I have no doubt that you and Gabriel will be very happy indeed.”

## Chapter 28

Elizabeth Bennet sat quietly on the window seat in her bedroom, gazing at the crescent of the morning sun peeking over the horizon. She had slept well but awakened early, and now with the household still slumbering, she contemplated the enormous changes the upcoming day would bring.

She turned to look around her room, which looked strangely empty. Her clothing and trinkets had already been packed; most were on their way to Pemberley, while one trunk was waiting to be placed on the carriage which would take them north to Derbyshire. She would never live at Longbourn again, and while she was overjoyed at the prospect of marrying the man she loved, it was a little sad. Longbourn was the only home she had ever known.

The door creaked a little and she looked up to see Jane, clad in her dressing gown, framed in the doorway.

“Come in, Jane. I see you woke early as well.”

“I did, very early. I have been awake

these three hours.”

“Oh, my dear, do come and sit next to me,” Elizabeth suggested, patting the seat next to her. Jane obeyed promptly, and for the last time the two girls sat side by side, arms wrapped around one another, as unmarried ladies.

“Are you nervous about tonight?” Elizabeth asked hesitantly.

Jane leaned a little closer and admitted, “A little. Mama was not amazingly helpful regarding the wedding night, was she?”

Elizabeth chuckled. “She was dreadful, but at least Aunt Gardiner was able to pull us aside and calm our fears to some extent. I expect it will be a strange experience, no doubt, but...”

“A blessed one,” Jane finished. “I quite agree. I am both anxious and anticipatory.”

“Of course, we have to make it through the wedding and the breakfast as well. I hope that Mother will not collapse from nerves; she is, without a doubt, ecstatic to have two daughters well married, but all this has been rather a strain on her famous nerves. I fear she might fall into genuine hysterics!”

“Do not worry about that, Lizzy. I had

similar concerns and spoke to Kitty and Lydia; they agreed to distract Mother as needed today.”

“And you believe they can?”

Jane’s lips curved upwards as she said, “Lydia has long been able to maneuver our mother into doing whatever she wanted. Now that our youngest sister has turned over a new leaf, she is willing to use that ability to assist her family. I have no doubt that she can keep Mama calm and happy today.”

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The sun shone in the skies, interspersed with great puffy clouds, which floated like great balls of cotton overhead.

The carriage pulled up in front of the church and the door opened. A moment later, Mr. Bennet stepped out and carefully helped out his eldest daughter, followed by his dear Elizabeth.

The church at Meryton had never been so full. Everyone knew the Bennets. Most liked them, and even those who did not nevertheless wished to observe two of their



own married to exceedingly eligible bachelors.

The Lucases were in attendance, as were the Collinses, who had fled Kent for a time in the wake of Lady Catherine's wrath. The Earl and Countess of Matlock, presented with a fait accompli, had graced the people of the town with their presence; the earl, in particular, had been somewhat dismayed that his nephew was marrying a woman of no fortune or standing, but Richard Fitzwilliam could be very persuasive when he chose. He stood next to his parents, dressed splendidly in his military uniform, and many of the young ladies eyed him with appreciation.

Georgiana Darcy sat in the second pew with Mrs. Annesley, her companion, at her side. Georgiana was vibrating with excitement; she had often longed for a sister, and in their few times together, she had found in Elizabeth a kind and fascinating woman. She was overjoyed, moreover, that she would be living with the Darcys from this time forward, or at least until she too found love. At the tender age of sixteen she was in no great hurry to wed, but she knew she wanted a marriage like her brother's, one based on mutual adoration and respect instead of merely money and connections.

Lady Amelia Hartford sat in front of Miss Darcy, her face wreathed with smiles, her eyes filled with tears of joy. She had prayed often that her Gabriel would find a loving wife, and she had no doubt that Jane Bennet, serene and patient and kind, was the perfect match for her son.

The organ, a surprisingly good one for a village church, suddenly burst forth with music under the talented fingers of the local music master. Fitzwilliam Darcy and Gabriel Hartford stood at the front of the church a step below Mr. Allen, the rector, and turned as the back door of the sanctuary opened.

Mr. Bennet stepped within with Jane on his right and Elizabeth on his left. Jane, dressed in yellow with a golden gauze overskirt, was truly resplendent in the light pouring through the stained glass windows, but Darcy had eyes only for Elizabeth. She was clad in green, pearl combs in her hair, her fine eyes sparkling with excitement and joy. He found himself suddenly short of breath. He had done it; he had won the woman he loved with all his heart.

And now Mr. Bennet was at the front of the church, carefully transferring Jane's hand to Mr. Hartford's arm, and Elizabeth to

Darcy's, before the master of Longbourn took his place next to his wife and other daughters.

Darcy gazed down at Elizabeth, and she looked up at him with a glowing smile on her lips, and the two couples turned to face Mr. Allen.

The rector looked down approvingly at them and began, "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God..."

/

*The Golden Stag Inn*

*10 miles north of Meryton*

*10 hours later*

Dinner had been cleared from their private parlor, and Elizabeth, with a sly smile at her new husband, rose to her feet. "I will leave you to your port, my darling. Please join me in my bedchamber at your convenience."

He watched her, his heart beating rapidly, and felt a great desire to chase after her immediately but no, she would need the

assistance of her maid to change ... to change into her dressing gown, to remove the pins from her glorious hair.

He poured himself a glass of port, took a careful sip, and stared at his watch. He would give her thirty minutes, and then they would come together as husband and wife for the first time.

It would be a long thirty minutes.

# Epilogue 1

*December 15th, 1813*

*Netherfield Hall, Hertfordshire*

“Darcy, Mrs. Darcy, please do come in!” Charles Bingley cried out hospitably. “I am certain you are quite chilled and wish to warm yourself by the fire.”

Elizabeth stepped quickly into the front hall of Netherfield and turned to take her baby son from her husband’s strong arms.

“Fitzwilliam, Adam is hungry.”

“Elizabeth needs to care for the baby, Bingley,” Darcy said to his friend. “Perhaps she could be shown to her room immediately?”

“Of course! Abigail, escort Mrs. Darcy to her room.”

“Yes, sir!”

Elizabeth rose on her toes to give her husband a quick kiss on the lips and climbed the familiar stairway to the upper level where she could nurse her infant in privacy.

Darcy watched her fondly until she was

out of sight and then turned to observe Bingley grinning at him in amusement.

“It appears that the joys of marriage have not diminished in the least, Darcy,” Bingley commented. “Please do join me in the drawing room for a drink!”

Darcy chuckled as he followed his friend, eager to warm himself by the roaring flames of the fire. Hertfordshire was experiencing an unusual cold snap for December, which had made the last day of travel from the north quite tiresome. Little Adam, nestled in blankets and held against the warm body of either his mother or father, had not been bothered in the least by the cold, but his parents were pleased to be indoors.

“If anything, my marriage to Elizabeth has only grown more wonderful in the last year,” Darcy said, taking a glass of brandy from his friend’s hand with a nod of thanks. “She is a marvelous wife and mistress of Pemberley, and a loving mother to our child. I am truly blessed.”

“I am extremely happy for you,” Bingley answered.

“And I am overjoyed for you,” Darcy said, his voice thick with fervor. Two years

ago, he would have disdained such open emotion, but Elizabeth had softened him considerably since she danced unexpectedly into his life. “I have no doubt that you and Mary will be happy together.”

“I am entirely certain of it,” Bingley declared, dropping casually onto his favorite wing backed chair. “It probably seems an odd thing given that I originally pursued Mary’s eldest sister, but I know that I am more compatible with Mary than I ever was with Jane.”

Darcy leaned back and smiled contentedly. The news that Charles Bingley had proposed to Mary Bennet had been a surprise, but a very pleasant one. Elizabeth had been delighted that her third sister, who was not always appreciated by Mrs. Bennet, would be so well settled.

“I am thankful, Bingley,” Darcy said, taking an appreciative sip of brandy and relishing the subsequent glow of warmth in his innards. “I was largely responsible for the failure of your courtship with Jane and must confess to great relief that you have found happiness elsewhere.”

“Do not give it another thought,”

Bingley urged. "I believe that Jane and I could have been happy together, but in retrospect I was not mature enough to be a good husband to her. I have, I hope, grown up significantly in the last year. In addition, Mary has a core of steel which I lack, but that I appreciate and admire. She is marvelous with the tenants of Longbourn and Netherfield; indeed, I partially fell in love with her watching her deal with the Simpsons and the Audleys. She is kind, but she also has an eagle eye for laziness, and is not willing to reward it. Mary is truly remarkable."

Darcy, staring at his cheerful friend, was surprised to feel an invisible weight drop from his shoulders. He realized that he had still been feeling guilty over interfering with his friend's courtship with the former Jane Bennet. Bingley's words made all the sense in the world; Jane was an agreeable woman, as was Bingley, and if they had married, it was quite possible that family and friends and servants would have taken advantage of them.

"I am thankful, Bingley," he repeated again.



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*On the road to Hertfordshire*

“Are you quite certain you are well, Jane?” Gabriel Hartford inquired, scrutinizing his wife carefully.

Jane cast a pleading look at her mother by marriage, and Lady Amelia, seated across from the couple, leaned forward to pat her son reassuringly on the knee. “Now Gabriel, do stop fussing! Jane is entirely well.”

“The carriage jolts so very much,” he fretted. “I find it rather uncomfortable, and you are the one carrying our child!”

Jane laughed and planted a loving kiss on her husband’s cheek. “My darling, I am so much better than I was even a few weeks ago. I feel wonderful, I assure you!”

“You look wonderful as well,” Gabriel murmured, returning her kiss.

“Now, now, my dears, do remember that I am in the carriage with you!” Lady Amelia said. “I truly delight at these exhibitions of young, but I must insist that you save your more enthusiastic physical demonstrations for when I am not present.”

“Of course, Mother,” Jane agreed in amusement. She already felt far closer to Lady Amelia than to her own mother, which was in some ways regrettable, but in other ways thoroughly delightful. The fifteen months since her marriage to Gabriel Hartford had been wonderful, though not always without friction between a man and woman who were still getting to know one another. Gabriel Hartford did have nightmares about the war on occasion, and Jane did get stung by a bee once, and the servants, uneasy at the sudden appearance of a new mistress, had been initially suspicious, though Jane soon won them over.

Now Mrs. Jane Hartford was carrying the heir of Beehaven in her womb as she, along with her husband and mother in law, drove north to Meryton to attend the marriage of another sister.

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*Longbourn*

“Let me look at you!” Mrs. Bennet ordered, inspecting her third daughter. “My

dear, you do look very well, though would not the white gown be better for your wedding?"

"Not at all, Mama," Lydia said authoritatively. "Mary's coloring is better suited for primrose; white will make her skin look sallow."

"Well, you are the expert," her mother said, too happy to be quite as obstinate as usual. "My dear Mary, I do hope you have thanked your younger sisters; you never looked so well before Lydia and Kitty took you in hand. You could not have won Mr. Bingley without them!"

Lydia, who had grown surprisingly close to Mary in the last year, looked at her mother with irritation, but Mary smiled reassuringly at her youngest sister and said sedately, "Indeed, Mama, I am most grateful to Lydia and Kitty. Now, I presume all is ready for the wedding breakfast tomorrow?"

"Oh, you are quite right to remind me! I must speak with Cook to make sure that ... oh dear, if the oranges do not arrive on time, I will never hold my head up again!"

She bustled off, calling stridently for Cook, and Kitty began assisting Mary to remove her dress, which would be set aside for

the wedding ceremony the next day.

Lydia was still frowning toward the open door. "I do wish Mama would stop saying such rude things to you, Mary," she said. "It is so stupid! I Mr. Bingley obviously finds you very attractive indeed!"

"I appreciate your championship of me, Lydia, but you need not worry that I am hurt by Mother's comments about my lack of beauty. I am, without a doubt, the plainest of the five of us, but it no longer distresses me. Mr. Bingley has told me that while he used to look upon physical beauty as the most important attribute in a woman, he now realizes that mind and soul and spirit are far more vital in a loving marriage."

"For the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart," Kitty said rather unexpectedly.

Mary nodded and said, "Exactly, Kitty. I clung to that verse for so many years when I felt diminished compared to my more handsome sisters. Now I realize that being attractive can be a blessing, but it is not the greatest blessing. I have no doubt that Mr. Darcy and Mr. Hartford love our sisters

because of their character and temperaments, not merely because they are handsome. Besides, I am confident that Mr. Bingley does appreciate my appearance, and he is the only one who really matters now.”

“I am certain of it,” Lydia agreed, “I have seen Mr. Bingley look at you, dear sister, and it quite takes my breath away. He definitely does not consider you plain!”

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### *On the road to Hertfordshire*

“I hope I did not ignite any suspicions in my latest letter to my mother,” Anne de Bourgh worried aloud as the carriage rolled steadily towards Meryton.

Richard Fitzwilliam, second son of the Earl of Matlock, grinned at his cousin and said, “Anne, you truly need not worry. Lady Catherine is tied up at the Matlock estate battling my father. By the time she returns to London, we will be safely wed. I will not permit her to bully you, Anne. I promise.”

Mrs. Jenkinson, Anne’s companion, said,

“I confess, Colonel Fitzwilliam, that I have never understood why Lady Catherine did not suggest that *you* marry Miss de Bourgh after Mr. Darcy found a bride. You are very eligible, sir!”

“I am also a military man, Mrs. Jenkinson, and accustomed to command,” Richard pointed out. “Darcy is decisive as well, of course, but Lady Catherine always assumed that Darcy would carry Anne away to Pemberley and leave her to administer Rosings as she saw fit.”

“She is in for quite a surprise then,” Mrs. Jenkinson said calmly, though inwardly she was gleeful. She had held her position as companion of Miss de Bourgh for many years now, and while she was genuinely fond of her charge, she found Lady Catherine extremely overbearing and annoying.

“Yes,” Richard agreed, his eyes suddenly hard. “Lady Catherine will be forced to accept a great many changes once Anne and I are safely wed.”

“You do have the wedding license?” Anne asked worriedly.

“Yes, I do,” the colonel answered, smiling reassuringly at the lady who would

soon be his wife. He had long cared for Anne, and while he was not in love with her, or she with him, they had realized in the last year that their temperaments were compatible. Anne was eager to escape from the dictatorial control of her mother, and Richard was desirous of wedding an heiress, hence the decision to wed. Given Lady Catherine's probable response, they had decided to marry without informing the current mistress of Rosings ahead of time.

"It is very kind of Mr. Bingley and Miss Bennet to allow us to share their wedding day," Anne said.

"It is indeed," her fiancé concurred.

/

There were cries of excitement as the two newly married couples walked into the dining room at Longbourn. The new Mrs. Bingley looked around with appreciation; while the couples had been signing the wedding register and accepting the congratulations of those who had attended the ceremony, her sisters had rushed back to Longbourn to put the final finishes on the

wedding breakfast.

The table was groaning under the weight of a wide variety of foods, and extra servants bustled to and fro, carrying platters of baked delicacies into the other rooms. Longbourn would be full today, as Mrs. Bennet was eager to show off her newly married daughter to the world.

“Oh Mary!” Elizabeth Darcy exclaimed, rushing up with her husband slightly behind her. “Congratulations! I am so very happy for you!”

“Thank you, Elizabeth,” Mary responded, her face glowing. At her side stood Charles Bingley, his own face suffused with joy.

Darcy, who was holding his baby son in his arms, shifted the infant so that he could shake Bingley’s hand. “I must also congratulate you, Bingley. Mrs. Bingley is a wonderful woman.”

“I am enormously blessed,” Bingley answered. “Not merely in acquiring a most wonderful woman as a wife, but her extended family as well.”

“We are brothers now,” Darcy said with satisfaction.



/

“Congratulations, Mrs. Fitzwilliam!”  
Jane Hartford exclaimed.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hartford,” Anne answered jubilantly. She had been on edge throughout her wedding ceremony, fearful that her mother would come rushing into the church in Meryton to stop the wedding.

Nothing of the sort had happened; the sacred words had been said, the wedding register had been signed, and she was now Mrs. Richard Fitzwilliam, until death parted her from her husband.

She felt his hand on her arm and looked up, smiling shyly. She had always been fond of him, and now it was something more; not ardent, romantic love perhaps, but genuine affection and friendship. She also felt safe for the first time in living memory. Richard would not allow himself to be overborne by Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Richard would protect her.

/

Miss Caroline Bingley sat in a forgotten corner of the drawing room in Longbourn and gazed around with a mixture of fury and bewilderment.

How had her life come to this? She had toiled hard and long to attract Darcy of Pemberley; she desired above all things to become his wife, and when her brother had informed her that Darcy was marrying instead the impertinent, impoverished Miss Elizabeth Bennet, she had thought she would die of embarrassment and fury.

Caroline had, at least, taken heart that her brother Charles had not married into the Bennet family, whom she now thoroughly loathed; if nothing else, she had succeeded in preventing the insipid, if handsome, Miss Jane Bennet from becoming the mistress of Netherfield Park.

And now, all that had come to naught, for Charles, strangely altered after his failure to win Jane Bennet, had settled at Netherfield in order to devote himself to the interests of the estate. Not surprisingly, Mrs. Bennet had promptly gotten her claws into her brother again, though it was startling that Charles had

not chosen either Miss Kitty or Miss Lydia, who were at least handsome! Instead, he was now married to Mary who, while much improved in appearance for some reason, was not beautiful.

Caroline peered around the room and felt a strong desire to weep with angry disappointment. All she wanted in life was to marry a wealthy, landed man and climb the ranks of society. Was that so much to ask? Why were far less worthy women fortunate to attract the attention of rich, well born men?

It was not fair!

/

“He is absolutely precious,” Jane said, cuddling her nephew close to her.

“He is the delight of our lives,” Darcy declared.

“I am so thrilled for you that you are also with child, my dear sister,” Elizabeth said.

Jane looked lovingly on her husband, who was smiling down at the baby in his wife’s arms, his eyes faraway. “Gabriel and I are ecstatic.”

/

“My Jane actually met the Prince Regent, Lady Amelia?” Mrs. Bennet asked breathlessly.

Lady Amelia took a sip of hot chocolate and said, “Indeed, Mrs. Bennet. Gabriel and Jane have attended three parties at the Pavilion, and the Prince Regent spoke to my son and your daughter each time. He was obviously pleased with their company.”

“Oh,” Mrs. Bennet gushed, “and to think that I was initially unhappy that Jane was wedding your son! A duke himself could not have been a better husband to my daughter!”

/

Lady Catherine de Bourgh stared in confusion at the myriad carriages and horses which were crowding the side yard of Longbourn. Was a party going on? One in the morning, no less?

She would have words with Anne when she found her! It was bad enough that the girl

had crept out of the de Bourgh house in London to scuttle off to Hertfordshire, but to come here, to Longbourn, the locale of Lady Catherine's greatest defeat at the hands of the impertinent Mr. Bennet? How *dare* she?

Catherine de Bourgh huffed to herself; no doubt Anne had never intended to tell her mother of her journey to Hertfordshire. In truth, Lady Catherine would likely never have known of her daughter's rebellious journey because she had planned to stay another full week at the Matlock Estate in Wessex. However, her brother, the earl of Matlock, had fallen ill. Lady Catherine had left in haste, only to discover back in London that Anne and Colonel Fitzwilliam had departed without leaving a message regarding their destination. Fortunately, Lady Catherine's butler, a most useful servant, had overheard their plans and promptly shared them with his mistress.

A chaise pulled up behind the de Bourgh carriage and a middle aged couple, dressed in Sunday finery, descended to the ground. The man was a familiar one, and Lady Catherine strode forward and demanded imperiously, "Sir William Lucas, what is going on here? Why are all these vehicles scattered untidily about the lawn of this inferior house?"

Sir William turned in surprise and then, recognizing the patroness of his daughter's husband, bowed deeply. "Lady Catherine! What an incredible honor this is! I wondered why you were not at the ceremony. I am delighted that you were able to come to the wedding breakfast."

Profound unease settled into Lady Catherine's chest at these cheerful words.

"Wedding ceremony? What wedding ceremony?"

Sir William jolted in confusion. "Why, Colonel Fitzwilliam married your daughter, the former Miss Anne de Bourgh, only an hour ago! Did you not know?"

Lady Catherine stared at the man and was bewildered to see him dividing before her very eyes. How could that be? Surely there were not two Sir Williams. One was quite enough!

Really, she felt very peculiar. Not that there was anything wrong with her, of course. She was a strong woman with an amazing constitution. She had no patience for women who...

Lady Catherine fainted.

## Epilogue 2

*Brighton,  
August, 1822*

“Well, Elizabeth,” Lady Amelia asked with a twinkle in her eye. “What do you think of it?”

Elizabeth Darcy rose to her tiptoes to attain a little more height, and then lowered herself and turned toward her old friend. “On the one hand, it is quite incredible and indeed attractive.”

“And on the other hand?”

Elizabeth turned back to survey the Royal Pavilion and tilted her chin beguilingly. “On the other hand, it reminds me a little of Frankenstein’s monster; really, how many architectural styles can be crammed into a single, enormous residence?”

Lady Amelia laughed at this. Even after many years, she still found herself surprised and charmed by Mrs. Darcy’s utterances.

“There is some truth to that,” she commented as she and the Darcys began strolling back toward Hartford House. “More

sober architects find the Royal Pavilion rather ostentatious, but the King has never been a restrained, modest, or plain man. The Marine Pavilion was quite lavish by itself, and then our liege hired Nash to enlarge the Pavilion extensively; it took eight years, you know, to achieve its current form.”

“At truly shocking expense,” Darcy said, mulling over the enormous sums spent by the former Prince Regent, now King George IV, on his palace by the sea. The pavilion itself cost at least four hundred thousand pounds to build in all its lavish glory, and the stables nearby, suitable for at least sixty horses and their grooms and stable boys, required another seventy thousand pounds.

“It is at least a fascinating structure,” Lady Amelia contended, “and Brighton has benefited in some ways by the King’s delight with it. But come, tell me about Frankenstein’s Monster! Did you actually read Shelley’s novel, Elizabeth?”

“I did,” her younger friend said, clinging more tightly to Darcy’s arm, “though I rather regret having done so. It is a terrifying book.”

“Frankenstein was a fool,” Darcy grumbled, causing his wife to laugh.



“Darcy is quite irritated with Victor Frankenstein, who is the creator of the monster in the book,” she said merrily. “At a critical point in the plot, Frankenstein wanders off to find the monster and kill it, which permits the creature to creep into his house and murder Frankenstein’s new wife. My husband finds that objectionable.”

“It is!” Darcy said in a heated tone. “He was being threatened by an angry creature who had already murdered several of his family and friends; why would he leave his wife alone in the face of such an obvious threat!”

“I believe you are intended to suspend your disbelief,” Elizabeth said, “though I quite agree that you, my love, would never be so stupid as to create a vile monster in the first place, much less allow it to out-think you at every turn.”

“It sounds like an interesting book,” their hostess mused.

“It is,” Elizabeth said, “but not at all a cheerful one.”

They were by this time walking briskly back toward Hartford House only to halt in the verge between road and sea when a

carriage pulled up beside them. Elizabeth exclaimed in delight at the sight of Charles and Mary Bingley's happy faces peering out the window of the vehicle; a moment later, more faces popped into view and Elizabeth heard screams of enthusiasm from the four young Bingleys, who were ecstatic to see their relations.

The din from the four Bingley children was too much for sensible speech, and Darcy, after a brief, roaring conversation with Bingley, waved them onward toward Hartford House.

"When are Jane and Gabriel arriving?" Elizabeth asked as soon as the carriage was far enough away to permit easy speech.

"They should be here within the hour," Lady Amelia said happily. "Your younger sisters' families are coming tomorrow along with Mr. and Mrs. Fitzwilliam and their children, and Georgiana and her family."

"I am overjoyed that Anne feels well enough to come," Elizabeth said. "Her last birth was a difficult one. She is still not entirely well, and I believe this is the first time in a year that she has left Rosings.."

"I hope the sea breezes and fresh air will

be a help,” Darcy said. “She has been much improved in health since Lady Catherine was forced into the Dower House, but she is still not a vibrant woman. We are all overjoyed that she has carried two healthy girls to term.”

“Indeed we are,” Elizabeth said, and then turned an arch look on the older woman. “I fear you will be entirely overrun with visitors, Lady Amelia.”

“Oh, my dear girl, you know I enjoy nothing better, though I am thankful you were able to hire two more houses in Brighton for the next few weeks. Even Hartford House would struggle to hold all of you. All the same, I hope you will all bring your children to enjoy the conservatory. I have some marvelous caterpillars and butterflies this year!”

/

Two mornings later, Lady Amelia Hartford sat on a wooden chair wedged solidly into the pebbles of Brighton Beach.

High above, the sun danced among the clouds, bringing scorching rays one minute, comforting shade the next. The waves were

gentle today, rolling and rippling forward endlessly but tenderly. It was a perfect day for little children, their small pant legs or skirts raised high, to tiptoe into the surf and laugh hysterically as the water kissed their feet.

The Darcys were walking down the beach in the opposite direction from the Royal Pavilion, peering into tidal pools. Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam were arm in arm, their four children cavorting and bouncing in the shallow, warm waters.

Lady Amelia's eyes shifted to Jane and Gabriel, who were standing nearby carefully watching their own children; nine year old Priscilla, the eldest, was solemnly playing in the pebbles with the heir to Beehaven, three year old Aaron Hartford. Six year old Marianne was playing with her three Bingley cousins, two boys and a girl, who dashed between the waves and the beach and back to the waves. Mary Bingley, who was expecting another child in a few months, was seated comfortably on her own chair with Charles Bingley standing between wife and progeny, eager to serve as necessary.

Down the beach a little, Lady Georgiana Warwick stood next to her husband, the Earl of Warwick. Amelia smiled fondly at the

couple; Georgiana had refused to marry without respect and love, and thus had been five and twenty before she wed her husband. She was pregnant now with their first child, and Warwick, a tall, solemn young man with a passion for politics, held onto her arm with tender care.

Amelia's gaze shifted next to the former Miss Lydia and Miss Kitty Bennet; both had made advantageous, though not brilliant marriages, to the relief of the Darcys. Mrs. Bennet, with her head turned by her elder daughters' connections to the haut ton, had spent years encouraging her youngest daughters to seek and find a noble husband. Both girls had, to her indignation, insisted on placing character over rank. Amelia spent an extra minute considering the laughing countenance of Lydia Hancock as she played with her two young sons in the surf; the woman's terrifying experience with George Wickham had resulted in welcome, lasting change, and while Mrs. Hancock was still a bright, vivacious creature, she was also cautious and genteel in a way which quite delighted her family. Mrs. Kitty Grove, happily married to a solicitor and also mother of two young sons, lived within ten miles of

her youngest sister's family in Hertfordshire.

Colonel and Anne Fitzwilliam would, Amelia hoped, make their way down to the sea at some point during their sojourn in Brighton; the trip on the previous day had proven a taxing one for Mrs. Fitzwilliam, and she was resting peacefully in her hired home a few minutes walk from Hartford House.

The only family missing was that of Gabriel's older brother, Michael. The heir to the Hartford estate in Kent had intended to bring his family to Brighton to holiday with the rest of the family, but a bad fall from a horse the previous week had resulted in a broken leg. Michael would recover in time, but he was not capable of spending hours in a jolting carriage.

She felt a brief stab of disappointment; it would have been so perfect for both her sons and their families to be present along with the Darcys and the Bingleys and the Fitzwilliams.

Life was never absolutely perfect, after all. It was a miracle, a gift of God, that the near disaster of young Lydia Bennet in Brighton had brought about so many wonderful results, most of all the marriage of her dear son, Gabriel, to the serene, patient,

loving, devoted Jane. She could only be thankful for all that had come to pass.

/

“Mama?”

Elizabeth looked down as her only daughter, seven year old Arabella, retreated from the edge of the water and took her mother’s hand in her own small one.

“Yes, my dear?”

“Can you tell me about when you fell in love with Father here in Brighton?”

Elizabeth looked down with a smile and tightened her grip on the little hand. “Of course, darling. Nine years ago...”

***The End***

### **Please Write a Review**

Reviews help authors more than you might think. If you enjoyed *Brighton Rescue*, [please review it on Amazon](#). A 5 star rating means you think others should read it. Thank you!

## **Sneak Peek of *Longbourn Inheritance***

**Elizabeth must oversee Longbourn after a family tragedy. Mr. Darcy is intrigued, Mr. Collins is baffled and Mr. Wickham is enticed.**

In London, he was well received by nobles and gentry alike. But was that because he was an exemplary person, or because everyone knew of his wealth and status?

“What do you think?” Darcy inquired aloud of his companion. “Am I truly obnoxious and overly proud to those outside my circle?”

Maxwell, the red spaniel, had been trotting around happily, nosing this, nudging that, kicking his heels with sheer delight at being on a walk with a fine human male on a misty morning in November. At these words, however, the beast sat down and lifted a soulful gaze to the man, his eyes glistening with adoration as he proceeded to pant slowly, his feathery tail wagging slowly back and forth along the ground and accruing a new muddy brown coating.

“You think not?” Darcy inquired,



dropping his hand to rub the dog's ears.  
"Well, that is a relief, young fellow. I feel certain that your analysis of human behavior is equal to my friend Bingley's, or perhaps even more reliable."

Maxwell barked agreeably and wagged his now very dirty tail, slobbering with ardent enthusiasm.

Darcy laughed and rose to his feet,  
"Well, I am glad that I have made a friend in you, at any rate. But come, I think we could both use a little more exercise, do you not think?"

Maxwell leaped forward happily at these words and man and dog wandered farther down the trail, growing increasingly wet from the still dripping fronds.

After slogging another half mile or so, Darcy was pleased to come upon the road which ran along the northern edge of Netherfield. He was pleasantly exhausted and wished to return to his room for a bath and a change of clothes.

He smiled to himself and took a few eager strides down the road. There was a sudden rustle across the lane and before Darcy could react, Maxwell lunged in front of him in search of a fragrant bird which had fluttered into smelling distance.

Darcy tripped over the dog, falling hard, and yelped in pain.

/

Elizabeth Bennet, dressed in a warm pelisse and woolen gown, was enjoying the chill of a sunny November morning when she heard the barking ahead of her on the road. With a frown, she peered down the road intently, where a fluffy red dot was leaping up and down in the distance.

She spurred Daisy on gently, causing her mare to begin trotting. A second later, the rope in her hand, the one guiding Buttercup, jerked backward slightly. Of course Buttercup, being old and lazy, had no desire to move quickly.

“Come, Buttercup,” Elizabeth commanded, and to the mare’s credit, Buttercup shifted into a sullen jog.

Two minutes later, the red leaping dot had grown into a long legged puppy who was circling around a gentleman who was sitting up cautiously on the side of the road, a man who was ...

“Mr. Darcy?!”

Fitzwilliam Darcy looked up, his brow

furrowed, his face slightly pale.

“Miss Elizabeth,” he replied tautly.

Elizabeth gazed down at the man with a mixture of bewilderment and embarrassment. The last time she had met Mr. Darcy, she had given him a set down and while she was not ashamed of her words, she felt a little awkward at meeting him in this way, especially since he was apparently not well.

“Are you injured, sir?”

Darcy shifted a little and winced in pain, “I fear so, yes. Maxwell dashed in front of me in pursuit of a bird, and regrettably I tripped over him.”

“Maxwell?” Elizabeth inquired, and then nodded as she carefully swung herself down to the ground. “Oh, the puppy. I am so sorry.”

“At least Maxwell seems all right,” Darcy commented, running a careful hand down the animal’s furry body. “I was afraid I might have lamed him in my fall, as I am a big man to fall on a smallish dog.”

Elizabeth’s eyebrows rose at this remarkable statement. Given Mr. Darcy’s lofty behavior, she would not have expected him to be concerned about the beast responsible, however innocently, for injuring him.

“Is anything broken, Mr. Darcy?” she inquired worriedly, glancing around in search

of anyone who might be able to help. Not surprisingly, no one was in sight. It was still early in the morning, and the only reason Elizabeth was on the road was because she desired to whisk Jane away from Netherfield as soon as possible. She would not have it said that Miss Bennet of Longbourn overstayed her welcome!

“I hope it is merely a sprain,” Darcy said, trying to rise to his feet before sinking back with soft moan of pain. “It may be broken, however.”

“I can ride to Netherfield and send help or, if you like, you can attempt to mount Buttercup. She is a placid horse, but I do not know if you are able to climb onto her with your injured leg.”

Darcy looked up at Elizabeth eagerly, “I would like to try, Miss Elizabeth. The ground is uncomfortable, and I confess to being wet and increasingly cold.”

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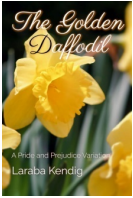
**I hope you enjoyed this excerpt from *Longbourn Inheritance*! The complete book contains 32 chapters, plus a two-chapter epilogue and multiple happily ever afters! It is [now available on Amazon and Kindle](#)**

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**- Laraba**

# Regency Romance Books by Laraba Kendig

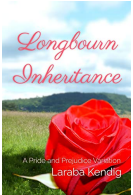
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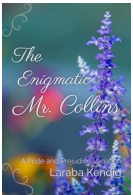
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**Mission to Meryton**



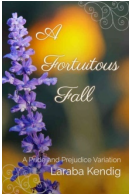
**Longbourn Inheritance**



**The Enigmatic Mr. Collins**



## Darcy Sails After Her



## A Fortuitous Fall



## The Banished Uncle



## The Blind Will See



## I am Jael



[I Have Been Jaeled](#)

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## Note from the Author

Thank you for reading this book; you loyal readers are just the BEST!

Here in the Midwest of the United States, it is finally autumn. When I was a child, I lived in the South American rain forest for three years. It was very, very, very hot and humid. For many years after that, summer was my favorite season because I grew accustomed to 90 degree temperatures and 90% humidity.

Now that I am middle aged, I find myself loving autumn. There are fewer bugs and the weather is far more pleasant for walking, which is my favorite form of exercise. The leaves are starting to change right now and our flower bed is a beautiful mixture of roses, butterfly bushes, and weeds. Yes, weeds. We do not, sadly, employ a gardener, and I far prefer tapping away on my keyboard to rooting out invasive plants.

Speaking of weeds, I can say confidently that Lady Amelia and Gabriel Hartford would approve of the back three acres of our property which, except for a little judicious mowing and the murder of poison ivy, has been entirely left wild. Many butterflies and bees inhabit the landscape, and my husband, who is a skilled photographer, has taken

wonderful pictures of such beauties. Most of my book covers are from pictures he has taken!

I wanted to write a brief note regarding Mr. Bingley in this story. This is my tenth Pride and Prejudice variation novel, and it is the first time in which Jane and Bingley did not end up together. The reason for the failure of their courtship was not that Bingley was evil, but that he was indecisive and weak.

It is an interesting reality that sometimes a person can have good intentions, and yet his decisions are wrong. Bingley was afraid Jane would feel obligated to marry him even without love because of the entail on Longbourn, so he decided not to return to Netherfield when Darcy and his sisters convinced him that Jane did not truly care for him.

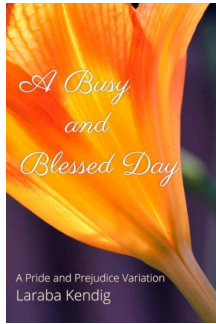
In the original Pride and Prejudice novel, Elizabeth says that Bingley's actions in abandoning Jane exposed him 'to the censure of the world for caprice and instability' and Jane to 'derision for disappointed hopes.' His behavior was, for that time and place, rude in the extreme. He was courting Jane, albeit unofficially, and to leave without so much as a word of farewell was inappropriate and uncultured. Darcy was wrong to tell him to stay away, and Bingley was wrong to go along

with it. In this story, he loses the fair Jane through his weakness, though I did find a happy marriage with Mary.

I also wanted to mention Wickham; in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, men and women were executed for minimal crimes. It is heartbreaking to read of individuals losing their lives over petty thievery, but such was the way of the times. Wickham managed to rack up several serious infractions in this story; desertion, thievery, and abduction. It is not at all unlikely that he would be sentenced to death.

Again, thank you for reading my book. I hope you enjoyed reading this story as much as I enjoyed writing it. □

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# Dedication

This book is dedicated to my husband and children, who have loved me and supported me throughout my authorial endeavors. I also wish to express my gratitude to my Lord Jesus Christ, who died for my salvation and walks with me every day of my life.

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